

**My Friend's
Little Sister Has
It In for Me!
Volume 1**

mikawaghost

VISIT...

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My
Friend's
Little
Sister

vol. 1

Author:
mikawaghost

Illustration:
tomari



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Prologue

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that men tease the girls they are interested in.

I have no idea who came up with that and decided it was now a fact, but it's never been true for me. After all, teasing a girl is a surefire way of being hated, right? It's way better to treat them nicely, and as a man who values efficiency, it makes sense, too.

"But girls love bad boys!"

Gimme a break. That sounds like something wife beaters tell themselves so they can sleep easy at night. Any girl who's attracted to someone who flips so easily between nice and mean needs to snap out of it. In the first place, I don't want to associate with girls who're into misery and misfortune. I mean, why else would you be attracted to that sort of person?

And then there's the reverse situation.

Imagine a girl breaking an egg down your shirt before fluttering her eyelashes at you and saying she only did it because she loves you. It wasn't just any shirt, either. It was the brand new T-shirt just released by your favorite VTuber. You know? The limited edition one?

You wouldn't let her get away with that, right?

If you're still not convinced, picture this.

Your girlfriend, washing the egg goop off your T-shirt after going off at the girl who did it, before she holds you into her ample chest as you cry about how your beloved merch just lost 90% of its value.

Now *that's* the kinda girlfriend I want.

I know I'm speaking as a guy, but I don't think that matters. Nice people are nice. Mean people are not. Sounds simple, but it's true.

So wouldn't it make sense for all humans, no matter their gender, to act kindly to the object of their affections in the pursuit of love? I always thought so.

In fact, I was sure that tsunderes and girls who acted mean to their crushes couldn't exist outside the world of anime and light novels. 3D girls should be more straightforward, smiling to their crushes, and making their feelings clear from the get-go.

But if my theory was true, it meant nothing but trouble for me.

Because every girl in my life seems to hate my guts.

Before you read too much further, I want to make one thing clear. Every girl in this book, though all beautiful in their own way, is a pain

in the ass. They take any chance they can to be annoying, cold, or commit atrocious sexual harassment. Sure, their behavior could be mistaken for “cute” at times, but the events in this tale are anything but.

Don't be fooled: it's not like I let them get away with it.

But if none of that bothers you, then feel free to read ahead.

Actually, I'm jealous of my friend who got to spend his days like he was the protagonist of a romantic comedy novel.

I just don't get why all these girls have to pick on me...

“So, that's where I'm at. You're my friend, whaddya think?”

“I think it must be nice to have the girls all over you like that...”

Chapter 1: My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me!

“Painting the red light district redder, my friend’s sister’s got her foot up our asses!”

When I came home from school and went into my bedroom, the first thing I saw was a pair of thighs.

There was a familiar girl lying stomach-first on my bed, kicking her feet to the beat. She’d helped herself to the new volume of a boys’ manga from my bookshelf, and it looked like she was having a whale of a time reading it.

This girl was Kohinata Iroha. She was a first-year at my high school (I was a second-year).

Her hair was a bright golden color, and the way it fluffed up, as well as the headphones around her neck, made her look like an emperor penguin. Her short-sleeved uniform and short skirt looked like they kept her cool in the humid heat of early summer. Without her socks, the line of her long, slender, pale legs was unobstructed from view. She was the epitome of a high-school girl, without the piercings or embellishments that would make her stand out as belonging to a particular subculture.

“Fill your ass to burstin’, then you’re on the floor! But that underwear of yours is to die for!”

She was the kind of girl who could charm anyone just by smiling at ‘em. And that blessed girl who preyed innocently on those tragic boys was now taking over my bed like she owned the place. If she were just sitting there quietly, maybe I wouldn’t mind so much.

“Don’t care if you’re a virgin, just know that this sister—”

“Turn that crappy rap ‘music’ down right now! I can practically see the bass!”

I pulled the stereo cord from the socket before she had a chance to do it herself. The room fell into total silence, and the girl on the bed suddenly turned around, as though she only just noticed I was there.

“Oh, hi, Senpai. You coulda knocked, y’know.”

“Knock to go into *my own* room? Anyway, you can’t put your music on so loud! Are those headphones just for show or something?”

Iroha grinned at me.

“You really wanna know what they’re for? You gotta get on my

route first to find that out! Meaning you gotta pick me out of *all* the other girls out there. I guess I could tell you if you're that into me, though! Truth is, these headphones..."

"I don't give a crap."

"Oooh, you're heartless!" Iroha stuck her tongue out at me.

She's such a pest!

She was always like this. Like she was constantly high. Adrenaline (or maybe endorphins) bombarded me the moment I thought about trying to kick this pest out of here. She flapped her gums before I could say a word.

"C'mon, Senpai! You should know I'll probably be in here when you get home, so at least knock! What if I was changin', huh?! Or is that what you want? Help! Someone call the cops! I've cornered a perv!"

"Sure, call the cops. I'd love to tell 'em all about how you broke into my room."

"So we're takin' it to court now, huh?" Iroha narrowed her eyes and smiled smugly as I pulled my smartphone out of my pants pocket.

She always got like this when she sniffed any hint of challenge. The desire to defeat me and assert dominance in any way she could was an inherent part of this creature's nature.

"I didn't 'break into' here, anyhow!"

Iroha rolled over onto her back, her assets giving a small bounce as she did so. The top three buttons of her worn blouse were undone, giving me a glimpse of the round breasts which threatened to spill out of it.

They were huge.



I had to look away as she taunted me with her feminine body. Iroha let out a whistle and narrowed her eyes like a cat about to pounce. She then started to fiddle with the silver key that sat between her ample breasts and hung from her neck by a leather cord.

It was a duplicate key to this place.

“See? Having the key means I didn’t break in, and you can’t deny it!”

“It doesn’t mean you can just come and go as you please! Where the hell did you get that, anyway?!”

“Come ooooo! You know you like it! I know you’re just dying to dive in here and sniff my scent right off the sheets as soon as I’m gone!”

“No way. I’m not gonna risk any of your scent hanging around my room!”

I grabbed a bottle of air freshener and sprayed it at her. She squealed.

“H-Hey! At least warn me before you spray that junk on me!”

“There’s plenty left in the bottle! So if you don’t wanna end up smelling...” I squinted at the bottle, “‘cotton fresh,’ then get the hell out.”

“Th-That’s no fair!”

Iroha rolled off the bed as I continued to spray her. She glared at me, giving me the dirtiest look she could muster.

“This how you’re gonna treat your little sister?!”

“No. Because you’re not my little sister.”

“I’m your best friend’s sister! Which practically makes me your sister as well!”

“No, thanks. I’d rather we stay strangers.”

“What if the two of you get married?! Then I’d be your sister for real!” Iroha paused thoughtfully. “Actually, that’d be a pretty good ship no matter who was the top...”

“H-Hold it! I’m a living, breathing human, and I have feelings, okay?! Keep that kind of thing to fictional characters!”

She crossed the line with that one, and so I felt it was only right to scold her for it. She really needed to find some sort of filter for her brain.

Kohinata Iroha wasn’t just any old schoolmate of mine. As she said herself, she was my friend’s younger sister. In junior high school, I ended up living in the apartment next to Kohinata Ozuma. We quickly became friends, but I soon learned that Iroha came as part of that package.

The key she had now was actually the key I gave to Ozuma. While he lived with his mom and sister, I lived alone. Which meant I was

doomed to die if I had a sudden heart attack or something. So just in case something happened, I entrusted a spare key to my esteemed best friend.

“This is a grave abuse of trust...” I grumbled.

“Ahahaha! This is hilarious! C’mon, get madder! You’re so cute when you’re mad, Aki-senpai.”

“Do I look like I’m laughing?!”

Iroha was rubbing the key up and down between her breasts. That key. The symbol of my friendship. And now she was doing something so indecent with it.

I began to grind my teeth. I could practically feel the veins popping out of my head at the absolute audacity of this brat.

Just then, I felt a vibration against my thigh. I pulled out my smartphone and saw a familiar name on the screen.

“This is important. Get out,” I warned Iroha.

“Don’t worry! I’ll be quiet!” She gave a hearty salute.

“You better.”

I kept a careful eye on Iroha and answered the phone.

“Hello. This is Ooboshi.”

“Heya! Been a while, Akiteru-kun!”

“Sup. Uh, I mean, hello, Tsukinomori-san.”

“C’mon now, no need to be so formal! Kinda hurts, you know...”

He had the sort of voice perfect for picking up women in a seedy bar, but he spoke like an innocent child. The name of this mismatched man was Tsukinomori Makoto. He was my uncle, but also a CEO. I wanted to stay in his good graces, if only for the opportunities he might be able to get me. He sometimes called in to see how I was doing in place of my parents, who were working overseas. Lately, though, we’d been discussing something else.

“Are you calling me about what I think you are?” I asked.

“I am,” he replied. “I thought about it...”

“You did?!”

“You basically want to join my company, fresh outta high school, zero experience, and without taking the company exam... Did you really think that would fly?”

“W-Well... Maybe not. So it’s a no?”

“I didn’t say that! I’ll give you a shot, with a couple of conditions. You’re my cute little nephew, after all! You know I’d give you the shirt off my back. The head of HR is a cold-blooded career woman, too. Without my shirt, maybe she’d crack and I’d have a chance with her, huh?!”

“Uh... it’s not really acceptable to walk around shirtless anymore, y’know.”

My uncle guffawed.

“I’m serious.”

Though I was grateful for his offer, at least. It’d just be a pain if he got fired before I had a chance with the company.

Tsukinomori Makoto. A man with a suave voice and a smart mustache (assuming the selfie he took with my phone was still accurate). He was also president and CEO of a large-scale entertainment enterprise: Honeyplace Works. It wasn’t just successful in Japan, but held its own worldwide against other global companies.

And here he was, telling me about his plans for gross sexual harassment.

Anyway.

“To think you’re already using your connections like this, at your age. You’ve sure come a long way.”

“I just figured it was the best way to achieve my goals. Not to mention the fastest.”

“Just remember, if you fall behind, I’m kicking you out!”

“That’s fine, but I won’t make you regret your decision!”

“I like your attitude!” I could practically hear my uncle’s grin through the phone. “Remember that I mentioned some conditions, though.”

I held my breath. I knew this was coming. After all, there was no such thing as a free lunch in this society. While there were both efficient and inefficient methods to get what you wanted, there was no getting away from having to pay a suitable price.

This was a world-famous enterprise I was dealing with. I couldn’t imagine how expensive the toll must be.

“Now, for the first condition... You don’t have a girlfriend, right, Akiteru-kun?”

A pause.

“Huh?!” was all I managed in the end.

“Why did you hesitate? Don’t tell me... I bet you get more action than a visual novel protagonist!”

“N-No, I don’t! I don’t even talk to girls!”

It was at that moment that I saw a lightbulb go off in Iroha’s head in the mirror. This wasn’t good. I glared at her, telepathically sending her a message to get lost immediately. It only seemed to encourage her, though. Her lips curled and she began to giggle.

“Senpai!”

“L-Let go of me!”

“Is someone with you?” came my uncle’s voice through the phone. “I think I’m sensing the sickening scent of a young couple and their icky-wicky love!”

“I... I got a cat!”

“A cat! Great! What kind?”

“Er... Um...”

Dammit. I didn’t know anything about cats. Judging from my uncle’s question though, *he* did. It didn’t look like I could bluff my way out of this one, and if I kept quiet, he’d know something was up. Should I tell him about Iroha?

No. Anything but that!

If anyone looked in and saw Iroha speaking so sweetly while pressing up against my back, they’d probably think she was my girlfriend. Sometimes in life, the most likely explanation *isn’t* the correct one, but even then I didn’t think my uncle would believe me if I insisted we weren’t an item.

“Hey, Senpai,” Iroha whispered into my ear. “If this guy finds out you’re with a girl, you’re gonna be in trouble, right?”

“Yes!” I breathed back. “So shut the hell up!”

Her lip curled like the mischievous cat I was pretending she was. She was clearly enjoying this.

“This super-naughty feeling... reminds me of NTR.” She giggled.

“You’re too young to know what that is.”

“But I do! It was in your search history.”

“You mean you’ve been through my phone?!”

“Akiteru-kun?”

My rage was cut short by my uncle’s voice. I screamed.

“The cat is scratching up my phone!” I wailed. “Quit it! C’mon!”

“S-Sounds like you got a pretty violent kitty. You gotta discipline them, you know!”

“Trust me, I would love to discipline this... cat-bitch!”

What was a female cat called anyway?

Iroha’s soft breasts and arms pushed up against me. Her sweet scent tickled my nose. Annoyingly, she was just as calm as ever; I couldn’t say the same about me.

“Ooh?” she purred. “Who exactly do you think is going to be disciplining who? Oh, you’re so cute when you get all flustered from my teasing. It gets me so excited, like I’m touching you on a jam-packed train.”

“Well I’m *not* excited, so stop touching me and get off! My future depends on this—”

“Excited? Touching?” Tsukinomori-san said. “Don’t tell me you’re —”

“I’m not! I said, uh... excited munchkin! Munchkin is... It’s a munchkin cat!”

Thank God I remembered that a munchkin was a kind of cat, and not just one of those tiny people from *The Wizard of Oz*.

“Oh, a munchkin! Those are very curious and playful! Man, I could just stare at them for days.”

"This one's a pain in the butt."

"Hahaha! I'm sure it's not; it just ended up with a tsundere as its owner! Make sure you look after it, okay?"

"I, uhh... I'll take good care of it." I let out an awkward laugh.

"Oh, I've just been called to a meeting! But I'm glad to hear you don't have a girlfriend."

I did it! He totally bought my cat story! Not that Iroha is my girlfriend.

"Although I'm not convinced just yet. That was only the first condition, after all. I'll tell you the others when I next get a chance, so bear with me for a bit."

"Okay. Thanks for calling, by the way. I know you're busy."

"Don't mention it! Anything for my dear nephew and daughter! This is nothing."

"Th... Wait, who?!"

"Adios!"

There was a beep.

"He hung up..."

That last thing he said to me was *definitely* out of place.

Well, whatever. At this rate, I'd be making my debut at Honeyplace Works soon!

No, wait. It's too early to be getting ahead of myself.

The moment Iroha realized the phone call was over, she flopped down on the bed and was at my manga again. It didn't surprise me in the least. Her flirtatious attitude just now had nothing to do with any interest in me. She just wanted to mess with me, but since she was my friend's sister, she probably felt she could get away with it. According to Ozuma, he hadn't seen her like this with anyone else...

With the key to my place, she came and went as she pleased. My friend's sister, Kohinata Iroha, who for some reason had it in for only me. She was also the greatest threat to me getting a place at my uncle's company. I couldn't let her walk all over me anymore. It was time to set some boundaries.

"Senpai!" Iroha whined. "I'm thirsty!"

"There's tomato juice on the second shelf in the fridge. It's rich and has no calories."

"Yes! You're kind as always, Senpai! I love you so much!"

Iroha hopped off the bed and out of the room. I sighed as I watched her leave. I supposed setting boundaries could always wait until tomorrow...

I really could be too careless sometimes. I hadn't noticed the smirk on Iroha's lips as she left me behind in the bedroom.

“...And that’s what happened.”

“You really do like Iroha, right? I mean, you had juice ready for her.”

“I have it because *I* like it! Just ’cause it happens to be her favorite too...”

“Nah, you know what it is? It’s ’cause you’re like the main character.”

“The heck does that mean?”

“If I told you, things wouldn’t nearly be as fun.”

“Ugh. Whatever. Just *please* can you tell her not to barge into my place anymore? You’re her brother!”

“Sure... I’ll tell her.”



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

omg, did you guys see yesterday's episode of My Honey? episode 5? it was sooo omg!!! i can't even!



AKI

Haven't seen it yet.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

you gotta watch it live! you missed out on mio-chan's super sexy stomach!



Makigai Namako

It was okay, I guess. I had my hopes up after episode 3, but now they suddenly hit us with a fan service ep? I dunno, seems a bit all over the place to me



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

ok, r/iamverysmart. it's just anime! as long as i get my t&a, who cares? also, i know it's aimed at men, but those two boys in there are just unnngh! omg! i'm literally dead!



Makigai Namako

So you're into girls, yaoi, AND shotas? Seriously, go to horny jail



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

listen, humans are hot, and i think that's beautiful



OZ

the cgi was great, and super smooth



AKI

Yeah, the CGI is good, but it's gotta be super expensive. Wonder how much they'd have to sell to recoup costs...



Makigai Namako

Nah, cgi is old news, and pretty cheap nowadays



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

yeah, who cares about how much it cost? Tell us what you like about the show!



Makigai Namako

This!



AKI

I'm just saying, if it doesn't sell well, we're not getting season 2, which would suck.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

then stop complaining and buy the dvds!!! i'ma get like, 2 or 3, i think



AKI

Must be nice to have a salary.



Makigai Namako

Unemployment woes!



AKI

Yeah, you can blame "school" for that...



Makigai Namako

Excuses, excuses. Go get a job!



AKI

I'm literally paying you guys! By the way, making doujinshi isn't a real job.



AKI

Speaking of, have you done those illustrations I asked for, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei? They're due tomorrow.



AKI

I assume you had plenty of time, since you watched My Honey live and all.



AKI

...Hello?



Makigai Namako

lol



OZ

welp



AKI

Meet that deadline, or join the dead line.



Makigai Namako

F



OZ

Don't be too harsh...

Chapter 2: My Friend's Sister's Brother Has a Fondness for Me

The human lifespan is short. A mere 876,000 hours.

I sat in the corner of my classroom. With every breath they took, the timer towards death was steadily counting down, and yet none of my fellow sophomores seemed concerned in the least. I already had my first-period textbook out, as well as the complete set of notes we had to hand in today. I liked to use my limited time efficiently, and my current preparation was the result of that.

I looked around the classroom. There were clowns begging their friends to let them copy their notes, and girls who'd just given up on it all and resorted to mental masturbation.

My classroom was a circus.

It was their fault for wasting the ample time we'd had, and now that they realized, it was too late. Homeroom would be starting soon. While they scrambled around looking for spare notes to copy, I was getting on with my studies, so that I could improve my academic abilities even further. It wasn't much, but in this competitive society of ours, it could make all the difference. Maybe I was biased, but I fully believed that I, Ooboshi Akiteru, was as average as they came.

Math, Japanese, English, social studies, science, physical education... I got around 80% in every test. For everything.

That might sound impressive, but it was the best I could do while using my study time as efficiently as possible. It was my very best, and the fact that I never got 100% on a test, or even top of the class, just meant that I wasn't talented enough.

Though I didn't have any major weak points, I had no noticeable strengths, either. I'm talking appearance-wise too, of course. If you looked up "average" in the dictionary, you'd probably find my picture.

Since I was so average, the only way to get ahead of other people was to use my time as best as I could. All I wanted was a guaranteed safe and stable future for myself. Though, there *was* one thing that set me apart from others...

"You dropped your eraser."

"Gah! Ooboshi! How long have you been there?!"

"Uh... a while."

"Oh... sorry. Guess I didn't notice. No offense."

The guy in front of me apologized as he rushed through his

homework. He was popular and handsome, unlike me, but at least his apology was sincere.

I knew he meant no offense. Even if he was doing better than me in life, that didn't make him a bad person. Actually, I quite liked him; even though we weren't really friends, he often took the time to chat with me.

The problem was that he usually didn't notice me. And there was a reason for it.

I had no presence whatsoever.

Humans usually pick out single features to remember and categorize each other by. If you wear glasses you're the "four-eyes;" if you're a pretty girl who wears make-up, you're a prep; if you have a mohawk, you're a punk; if your grades are good, you're the teacher's pet; and if you like to pull pranks, you're the class clown. Some of these names are more flattering than others. And some get even worse: "fatty," "baldy," "ugly"... but in all these cases, people are reduced to a single characteristic.

And what about me? I didn't have any of these negative features, but I didn't have any outstanding positive ones, either. I was completely plain. That was why no one remembered me, or even noticed me in the first place. It did mean that I never got outright ignored or bullied. No one talked about me. No one invited me to join in their conversations; I had to join in myself. Once I did, though, they just treated me normally.

It was the most efficient kind of life I could imagine.

I had complete control over what to do with my time, since it was never wasted by meaningless conversation or people trying to socialize with me. It was utter bliss!

That wasn't to say that I had zero friends, though. It just meant I could choose them. I could choose who I wanted to share my precious time with. And that's what I loved about my life.

"Heya, Aki..." someone said.

"You look dead today, Ozu," I replied. "As usual."

"Yeah, I was up all night. Look how red my eyes are!"

"Man, you always do this. Well, don't worry. You can borrow my notes if you want!"

"Thanks! You're the world's greatest friend!" He slumped down in the chair behind me, still letting out a series of yawns. I could practically see the fog of sleep threatening to come down on him.

This guy was so smart and handsome that he gave off a real main character vibe. Stick him in the middle of a poster surrounded by girls, and you've got yourself a perfect harem anime. That was my best and only friend: Kohinata Ozuma. I called him "Ozu" for short, and had decided to walk this life with him.

"I'll buy you some *anmitsu* to make up for it, all right?" Ozu said. "I heard that new place by the station is pretty good. You like sweets, right?"

"Really?" My eyes lit up. The combination of bean jam and fruit was to die for, but... "Nah, don't worry about it. It's no big deal."

"I feel bad though, copying off you all the time... Lemme make it up to you, yeah?" He grinned at me with all the charm of a fairytale prince.

I felt a jolt in my chest and tears welling up in my eyes.

"You're... the nicest guy I've ever met..." I mumbled.

"C'mon, quit exaggerating. Didn't you say you liked to live life efficiently? And now you're wastin' time getting all emotional?"

"I can't help it! My heart can't contain this much gratitude!"

"Weirdo. Though I guess I always knew you were kinda emotional. Reminds me you're still human."

"I am *not* emotional! Everything I do and feel is so that I can live my life at maximum efficiency!"

"Welp, it sure was kind of you to let me be part of your super efficient life, Mr. Roboto."

"Whatever." I decided to put an end to the conversation.

Ozu tactfully moved on to something else.

"I also wanna make up for how my sister's been treating you. You said she was at your place yesterday, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'm really sorry about her. I keep hiding the key in different places, but she always sniffs it out somehow."

"Don't worry about it. It's not your fault."

I still couldn't wrap my head around how Ozu and Iroha were related. They were just so different.

Ozu was the kind of guy who always put others first. He was good at recognizing and not overstepping boundaries. You saw just now how he apologized for the stuff his sister did, right? He was an absolute saint.

In fact, he was the complete opposite of his terror of a sister. Whichever god was playing Create-A-Human that day either decided to mess around with her genes, or was just feeling particularly cruel, as though he were creating her just to trap her in a pool with no ladders later. Suddenly Ozu let out a laugh.

"Y'know, I think Iroha has a thing for you."

"Huh?!"

"Oh, damn... You don't look happy about that."

"Duh. Jokes are s'posed to be funny."

"O-Oh. Think you could forgive me, then?"

"I guess. Though my heart can't contain all this disgust."

“Right, right...”

“Anyway, there’s no way she likes me. She’s just messin’ with me.”

“To hide her true feelings, right?”

“Ugh! I knew you’d say that. *Everyone* does. But it’s not true. Why would anyone treat someone that way ’cause they were into ’em? You’d wanna be nice to the person you like, right? Otherwise, they’re just gonna end up hating you. It makes no sense!”

“You’re talking like girls make sense, dude.”

“It’s not about girls. It’s about universal common sense. Besides, no one would be interested in me in the first place.”

I wasn’t looking for the kind of idealized teenagehood that you see in anime and manga. Plus, every girl I’d met in my life so far invariably hated me. If they even showed any sign of acknowledging me at all, it was always a negative one.

And so I gave up on romance. I had no hope anyway.

“I’m as average as they come. There’s nothing about me that girls’d find attractive.”

“I think you’re pretty popular with them, though.”

“That’s rich, coming from a chad like you.”

“But you *do* have good parts. I mean, you’re nice...”

“Yeah, ‘nice.’ The most average of the positive adjectives...”

“Man, just take the compliment. You’re always so stubborn when it comes to this kinda thing.” Ozu sighed and shook his head.

I did appreciate that he was trying to cheer me up. He was kind, handsome, *and* smart. There was no way that little old “nice” me could compete.

I already knew that Ozu had a bright future ahead of him. It wouldn’t be long till the world saw just what a great person he was, like I did, and I was genuinely excited to see how far he’d go.

As a friend, I wanted to treasure him. It was a shame about his sister, but I supposed it was all in the name of making life a bit more exciting.

Just then, the classroom door swung open.

Immediately, the air seemed to freeze. Every voice in the room came to a sudden stop, whether it was one begging for notes, or one just cracking jokes. The only sound that remained was the clacking of heels as our young teacher made her way towards the desk.

Her hair was gathered neatly atop her head, and her eyes had a sharp, intelligent glint to them. Her body was as slender as any model’s, with an ample chest to compliment it, while her suit hugged her figure perfectly. As usual, everyone was in awe of the beauty of this perfect teacher; she was the kind of beauty everyone wished to be taught by. Without sitting down, she swept her gaze over the gaggle of

students scattered around the room.

“The bell has rung. Why are you not in your seats? If you pigs don’t know how to read a clock, then I suggest you pack your bags and get out of here immediately.”

Silence.

“Sit, or be punished. Your choice.” The teacher slammed her heel down on the floor beneath her, leaving a dent and sending a crack through the room.

Every face drained of its color as the students shuffled back to their seats. Well, not every face. Some had gone red and were accompanied with a quiet panting. Best not to dwell on that too long.

“Every human starts as a worthless pig. Once you learn how to dance to society’s tune, you become a monkey. You lot are still far off from becoming full-fledged humans.”

It was hard to believe she was a teacher with all that disdain passing through her lips. Such a harsh teacher was rare nowadays, what with society being more vigilant against corporal punishment and abuse of power in schools. But here she was: our math and homeroom teacher, Kageishi Sumire.

At first, many of the boys in our class rejoiced at having such a quick-witted and beautiful teacher like her, but now it was only a handful of masochists who still felt that way.

She was now known as the Venomous Queen thanks to her sharp tongue, strict teaching, and the murderous reign of terror she commanded. Any student who put a single toe out of line was instantly brought back under her thumb.

“Let us begin.”



© tomari

At Her Majesty's command, homeroom began. I rested my chin in my hand.

Look at that smug expression on her face. Must be easy being a teacher if all you need is a harsh word to keep your class in line.

I wasn't stupid enough to voice my complaints out loud.

The school day came to an uneventful end, as usual.

"Home time!" Ozu cheered. "Let's go—"

"W-W-Wait... Have you... H-Have you got a second?"

"Huh?"

It was one of our classmates who had spoken, but I couldn't understand what anyone other than Ozu would want with me. I didn't even know this guy. I knew he sat on the other side of the classroom, but I couldn't put a name to the face at all. I took a wild guess and decided it was probably Suzuki.

I was completely baffled. He looked completely baffled too.

"O-Ooboshi. S-S-Someone's here to s-see you!"

"What's with the stuttering?"

"Sh-Shu-Shut up! Y-Y-Y-You'd be st-stuttering too! I-I mean, sh-she's... she's just so hot! Sh-She's waiting i-in the c-c-corridor. It-It's a first-year!"

"Oh."

There was only one "first-year girl" who could cause this kind of reaction that I knew of.

"She's super well-dressed, but not in a flashy way, y'know?! Sh-She's smart, polite to everyone, *and* she's an honor student! She's just so perfect! Y-You're so lucky that she's here for you, Ooboshi! W-Were you a saint in your past life or something?!"

"Meh, more likely a crook like Robbin' 'Ood." I sighed, left probably-Suzuki behind me and headed into the corridor.

"Hiya, Ooboshi-senpai!"

There was Kohinata Iroha, grinning at me. Not that I was expecting anyone else, since she was the only girl I spoke to. I still had no idea what she wanted, though. So I asked.

"What do you want?"

"Huh? You don't look pleased to see me." She blinked at me.

I hated this innocent act of hers when she was playing the courteous honor student. The fact was, much as I struggled to believe it, her grades were impeccable.

I knew what she was really like, though. She couldn't fool me.

"Why would I be? What's the point of calling me, just for me to go and get Ozu for you?"

“Because I don’t want to see *him*. I want to see *you*.”

“Quit talking like that, and go back to acting like the crazy dumbass I know you are.”

“Whatever are you talking about?” she asked softly, as though reprimanding me for daring her to misbehave in a place of learning.

Now she was trying the puppy-dog eyes on me. In reality, she was a sneaky snake. The students streaming out of the classroom behind me had no idea. They shot glances our way, the girls looking confused while the boys’ eyes blazed with jealousy.

“What. You wanna walk home together?”

“That’s right!” Iroha trilled with a bright grin.

I was glad she was so short. If the petty boys behind me were able to see how she smiled at me, I’d be in for it. They’d wonder about our relationship. What we were, how far we’d gone, etc., etc. Didn’t matter if I replied aggressively, or politely told them no, we weren’t an item, it’d be a massive pain in the ass either way. Not to mention that I wouldn’t be able to blend into the background anymore.

“Fine. Lemme just grab my stuff, and I’ll get Ozu too.”

I wanted to avoid hanging out with her right outside the classroom if I could avoid it. The possibility of a misunderstanding occurring was going up with each passing second. I spun around to head back into the room.

“Oh, don’t bother getting my brother,” she called after me cheerfully.

“Huh? Why not?”

They lived in the same apartment, and I lived right next to them. It made perfect logical sense for all three of us to go home together.

Iroha began to sway bashfully. Her cheeks were tinged pink as she spoke in a shy, quiet voice.

“D-Do you really have to ask me in front of all these people? I... I want it to be just you and me...”

“I told you to stop talking like that! I don’t even like you, but you’re making my heart twinge!” I took a step back to distance myself from her.

Iroha stared at me in shock.

“How... How could you say something so cruel?” she sniffed.

“We’re supposed to be going out...”

It was the worst thing she could have said.

“I beg your pardon?!” I snapped loudly.

“Don’t you remember how we made love so passionately yesterday? And now you’re saying you don’t like me? Are you just... playing with my heart?”

“We’re not going out! I was trying to *get* you out!”

“Please don’t make a scene! When you’re so loud, it reminds me of

when we're alo—"

"Stop blushing! People are just gonna get the wrong idea!"

I was sure that her words just now were clearly audible inside the classroom, and I could feel the curious stares of my classmates burning into me. To say it was uncomfortable would be an understatement. Just then, Ozu appeared, summoned no doubt by our shouting match.

"Aki, what's the matter?" Then, he spotted Iroha. "Huh? What are you doing here?"

"Hi!" Iroha bowed her head and gave him her bestest, sweetest, honor-studentest smile.

Ozu knew what she was really like, so it was no wonder he looked as confused as I did. He opened his mouth to say something, but Iroha carried on before he had the chance.

"Aki-senpai and I are dating!"

"I... Wh...?"

"*Oh my God!* I can't take it anymore! Get your ass over here, Iroha!"

"Eek!"

I grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away from the classroom door. With Iroha in tow, I stomped down the hallway as fast as I could, only stopping to catch my breath when we reached a deserted stairwell.

"What the hell was that all about? Is this some kind of newfangled scam?!"

"It's not a scam!" she said sweetly. "I mean, we're basically dating, right?"

"Quit the act."

"Ouch! You're so cold, Senpai." She giggled. "It's not like anybody was falling for that, anyway!"

Iroha returned to her usual self once she noticed we were really alone. She was doubled-over with laughter and struggling to catch her breath.

"I mean, you said you'd be in trouble if you had a girlfriend, right? So I decided to take that spot!"

"That's some twisted logic you got there..."

"It's really not deep enough to be talking about 'logic.'"

"Whatever. No one's gonna believe you anyway." I sighed and prepared to walk away.

Iroha began to twiddle with a strand of her hair.

"I dunno. I think it's pretty believable."

"I don't care what you think. It's not. All you've got going for you is your looks. We're totally incompatible."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I'm way too gorgeous for a plain-

lookin' dude like you."

I kind of wished she'd sugarcoated that. But whatever.

"Anyway," Iroha continued, "if *you* told everyone we were dating, they'd be like: 'Yeah, dream on, virgin!' But if *I* tell them, they'll all believe me!"

"So what you're saying is, they'd believe you but not me?"

"Yup!" She smiled at me cheerfully.

"Gimme a break..." I looked towards the ceiling in exasperation and applied palm to face. "Look, this concerns my whole future, okay? So please stay out of it."

I needed Tsukinomori-san's support if I wanted any hope of achieving my dreams for the future. The last thing I needed was this troublemaker sticking her nose in and destroying everything I'd worked so hard to build up. I turned around and started walking. Hopefully my actions were clear enough to let her know that I wasn't prepared to put up with this.

"You're so dense, Senpai. I can't believe you haven't noticed..."

I felt something pressing lightly against my back. Hot breath scorched my ear as the warmth from her soft chest seeped through the thin material of her uniform. I could feel a small, constant vibration from underneath... Was that her heartbeat?

What on earth was she doing?

"Would I be doing this if I didn't like you? You're always so mean..."

"Wh-What are you plotting? I'm not gonna fall for this cutesy act!"

"What if I asked you to turn around?"

"Ngh!"

"I know you're serious about your future. But you're forgetting what you've got right here in the present... It kinda hurts, you know..."

"Iroha..."

"I don't want you to go... I want you to stay with me forever. Forever and ever..." Iroha's voice quivered desperately.

Usually, the sound of her voice gave me an instant migraine. But now, I could feel something stirring inside my heart. Something warm and pleasant. Was she for real? After all this time... Did she really feel this way about...

"Just kidding! Gotcha, didn't I?! I've always wanted to do that, y'know? Like a super-serious confession to make your heart pound for once! Your reaction was so cute, too! What didcha think?!" She paused for my answer, but I gave none. "Oooh, I get it! You're too embarrassed, huh? You're so red, too, all the way to your ears! I can't take it! You're just too adorable!"

Iroha was still clinging onto my back, her fists digging into my stomach as she laughed with glee.

She was right, though. My face was red.

Red with rage!

"I'm never believing another word that comes out of your mouth, you bitch!"

"Uh oh! Gotta skedaddle!" Iroha squealed.

It had taken her less than thirty minutes to break me down with those crafty tricks of hers.

I swore to myself that next time, I wasn't going to fall for her bullshit.

"What the heck was she thinking showing up at the classroom like that?!"

"Looks like she really likes you."

"Dude, are you *blind*?!"

"No, but you are. You know our classroom is like, on a completely different floor from hers? That's dedication right there. You really think she'd come all that way for a guy she couldn't give two hoots about?"

"Sure, she gives hoots about me, but they're hoots of hate!"

"You're so stubborn. I'm sure she's into you! You think way too badly of yourself, seriously."

"Shut up. If she gives me a proper confession, maybe *then* I'll believe she's into me."

"Whatever, dude. I'll be happy just as long as you two get along."

Chapter 3: My Uncle's "Friend" Has a Grudge Against Me

It was 8 p.m. when I headed down the five flights of my apartment building with my phone in hand. Because it was so late, there were barely any people around, leaving my surroundings almost completely deserted.

I hurried towards a family restaurant in the neighborhood. Not because I was hungry, but because my uncle—Tsukinomori-san—had called me there. He was going to lay out his conditions for employment, the ones he didn't have time to specify in our last phone call.

I brushed my hair and chose my outfit carefully, making myself as presentable as possible. I had no inkling of what he might ask of me, but I was ready to get on my knees and lick his shoes clean if that's what he wanted. Anything to be a part of the world-famous entertainment enterprise that was Honeyplace Works.

I stepped through the doors of Royal Guest, a place that was open twenty-four hours a day. I would never come here by choice; for a family restaurant, it was a little pricey, and I was frugal on account of living by myself.

Today, my uncle would be paying for my meal. He'd chosen the restaurant, too. I felt guilty, having him treat me to something so expensive, but I also didn't want to make the social faux pas of arguing with him.

The world is all about give and take, I guess.

(Truth be told, I was actually a lot more excited to get my dinner paid for than you'd think.)

"Akiteru-kun! Over here!"

I caught sight of my stylish uncle before the waitress even had time to greet me.

"Looks like you got here before me," I said. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"No worries! Sometimes, it's the elders who have to respect the youngsters," he said, twiddling his bushy mustache.

Though his behavior gave off the impression that he was a snobbish man of new money, the reality was quite different. He was the kind of man that all CEOs should aspire to be like. Nowadays, there were a lot of managers who became all high and mighty the

moment they had a shred of power, and their temperament suffered from it, so it was rare to see one as laid back as my uncle.

I'm still in high school, though, so what do I know?

I did see a lot of it in memes depicting disgruntled office workers on the Internet, so it was probably true.

"I apologize for before," I said.

"C'mon, there's no need to be so stiff! Relax, or your joints'll be shot in ten years. Just as long as you stay stiff in the one place it counts, you'll be golden!" he guffawed.

I wanted to make a witty comeback to his crude joke, but I refrained. I sat down without saying anything, to which my uncle let out a small cough to clear the awkward air.

"Oh, we're waiting for one more by the way, but I can give you a quick rundown first."

I nodded, automatically sitting up straighter in my seat. I prepared myself to face the impossibility of the condition he was about to set before me.

"First, I wanted to let you know that I've been playing the game you sent me."

Tsukinomori-san set his smartphone on the table. On the screen was a game's start menu. Anime characters were cowering against beast-like shadows against the backdrop of a haunted house.

The game was called "*Koyagi: When They Cry*," and it was developed by 05th Floor Alliance. It was a simple free-to-play horror game with dating sim elements.

"I was really impressed that you managed to create a game, let alone get it on the app store."

"I wasn't the only one involved; there was a whole team behind it."

"Programmer: OZ. Illustrator: Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. Script: Makigai Namako. Then we have an anonymous voice actress, and producer and director: Aki. Which is you," Tsukinomori-san read off the credits.

"That's right. We were a team. It couldn't have been done without each and every one of us."

That's right. I made a game with a small handful of friends. No one else in our school knew about it but us, though.

"This game's made quite a splash in the industry. 'Who are these mysterious members of the 05th Floor Alliance?' people ask. They made an entirely new game with a coherent and engrossing plot, character designs just as charming as any professional work, and the voice acting's completely anonymous. They had no funding, yet their product has received rave reviews and reached over a million downloads through word of mouth alone..."

“That’s still not good enough, though. The games made by Honeyplace Works have been downloaded more than ten million times all together.”

“That doesn’t compare. We pour huge amounts of money into marketing when we release our games.” He grinned at me, continuing to twiddle his mustache. “You’ve got a really competitive product here, and your small team made it all without needing endless time or an overblown budget. I don’t even know if I coulda done the same at your age. Plus, I could see why it was such a hit when I played it.”

“Does that mean...” I began.

“What I want to talk to you about today is a different kettle of fish...”

In my excitement, I started to lean forward, but my uncle pushed me back down with a finger against my forehead.

“I already know about your work ethic, and I know well the hopes you have for you and your friends to come and work for my company. I hear you loud and clear. However.” Tsukinomori-san paused. “The adult world is more complicated than you might think. I can’t just hire you without any strings attached. Oh, hold on. The wait staff are waiting to wait on us.”

“Oh, right. Let me see the menu...”

One of the waitresses had been watching our table politely for quite a while without moving a muscle. I thought we’d probably wait for the third person before ordering, but it was starting to get to the point where we had to get *something*. I decided the drink menu was a good place to start.

“It’s already dinnertime, so go ahead and order whatever you want. Don’t be shy!”

“Thank you,” I replied as he reiterated his intention to treat me.

“Miss!” my uncle called.

“Yes, sir. May I take your order?”

“I’ll take an Italian steak meal, and he’ll have...”

“The carbonara with a soft-boiled egg.”

“Oh, and we’ll take unlimited drinks for the two... uh, for the three of us!” he added.

“Three?” The waitress looked confused for a split second, before apparently remembering that we were waiting for another person. “Oh, of course.”

My uncle opened his mouth again the moment the waitress turned to leave.

“You have some wonderful fingers, my dear.”

“I’m sorry?”

“What?” I blinked. What on earth was he talking about now?

“You handled that ordering doodad so elegantly, I was entranced.”

“U-Um...”

“How about it? There’s space in my car if you wanna celebrate fate bringing us together today...”

“P-Please excuse me! I have to get back to work!”

Her face flaming hot, the waitress hurried away into the back.

I don’t know what my uncle was expecting.

If he was anybody else, I’d probably let it slide. But as his nephew, I felt I had a responsibility to keep him in check and deter further sexual harassment.

“Don’t you think that was a little much?”

“Huh? I just spoke my mind. Isn’t that how you’re supposed to treat women?”

“This isn’t the sort of place where you can just say whatever you like...”

“If I like what I see, I say so. If I wanna flirt with someone, I will. How else are you supposed to enjoy life?” Tsukinomori-san said.

“I think there are other approaches, personally.”

“If you like someone, you gotta let them know. The whole tsundere act is only cute in anime, not real life.”

Finally! Someone who spoke sense!

Too bad it was the same person who made a pass at a waitress he’d only just met, but still. I had to give credit where it was due.

“Plus, it’s not like I upset her or anything. Take a look.”

Tsukinomori-san jerked his chin in the waitress’s direction. I turned to see her with her hands on her red-hot cheeks and letting out sigh after sigh. When she noticed us watching, she began to squirm, and responded with an awkward bow to my uncle waving casually at her.

I wasn’t sure if I would call that “not upset,” but it was definitely... something.

“I don’t know if that’s a good reaction...” I remarked.

“Well, women are complicated,” my uncle said sagely. “Maybe I got her a little flustered, but I can tell she didn’t dislike it. This kinda reaction means I only need two more shots to get her in my bed.”

“Wow... I’m impressed. I think.”

I’d forgotten how much of a playboy my uncle was. As a child, I remembered that he would often fight with his wife when we came over. If you asked me what they were fighting about at the time, I wouldn’t have a clue, but now I was almost certain it was his infidelity. In fact, forget “almost.” I *was* certain.

In some ways, my uncle was a real piece of work. Though I guess that said almost as much about me, as the one trying to win his favor. Speaking of which, I should probably stop having such slanderous thoughts about him. If I let any of that slip, I could kiss my future

goodbye.

“May I go to the bathroom?” I asked.

“Sure, knock yourself out.”

I excused myself so that I could pull it together. I had to remind myself to see past his dubious behavior.

He is my king. He is my god. I will do anything for him... I thought determinedly to myself as I made my way to the bathroom in the corner of the restaurant.

Given what happened next, it probably wasn't the best idea.

Since I was using around 95% of my brain power on refocusing my thoughts, I lost awareness of my surroundings. That was why I completely missed the notice on the unisex bathroom door which asked me politely to knock before entering, because the lock was broken.

“Huh?”

“...Nrk.”

Everything froze. The only sound had been the click of the door as I opened it onto the girl half-crouching in front of me.

Her fingers were hooked onto the inside of her light-pink panties which were halfway up her thighs. Presumably because she was putting them back on. She was still as a statue, the shock of being walked in on having paralyzed her.

I could even see a hint of what lay beneath her raised skirt, thanks to her panties not being there to cover it.



Silence, silence, and more silence.

We stared at each other.

If she were a boy, I probably wouldn't be so overcome with dread. But, of course, she was a girl. A very cute one, at that.

Her pale skin was so delicate that it looked like it could melt under my touch. Her short hair was a cool silvery blonde. She reminded me of a mermaid, not least because of the shell motifs on her necklace and earrings. She was almost a head shorter than me; a petite girl. Though her body wasn't exactly filled out, her shapely thighs and soft lips were enough to make my mind wander.

Was she in junior high or high school? It was hard to place an age on her thanks to her innocent-looking face combined with how hot she was.

It was then that I realized I'd been staring too long, when I should've been thinking of a way to smooth over this mess. It didn't matter that it was an accident. I had seen that which I should not have.

In which case, the best thing to do would be to feign ignorance. What would someone who hadn't noticed this girl do?

"Maaan, I'm gonna piss myself!" I yelled.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!"

Nailed it?

A scream reverberated throughout the bathroom. The next moment, I received a forceful blow to my solar plexus.

"Oh my God, that's hilarious! The first time you ever met, and it's 'cause you walked in on her in the bathroom!"

"It's not that funny."

"C'mon, it's not like anyone got hurt. Well played though, I gotta say!"

"You could've told me she was in the bathroom!" I protested. "You know, before I get myself put on some kind of registry!"

It had been thirty minutes since I walked in on that unfortunate girl in the bathroom, and right now, she was sitting at our table. I shoveled my tasteless steak into my mouth, eyeing my grinning uncle and the sullen princess sitting next to him sipping at her tomato juice. Sure, the entire thing was my fault, but that was no consolation whatsoever.

My thoughts raced, desperately clinging for anything that could count as distraction. The girl was drinking tomato juice. Iroha liked tomato juice. Was tomato juice popular with young girls these days? I liked tomato juice, too. In fact, I always had tomato juice in my fridge.

Did that mean I was actually a young girl?

It was hopeless.

The silence continued.

I gave a cough in an attempt to clear the air.

“S-So who is this girl, Tsukinomori-san?”

“Oh, you don’t remember her? You used to play with her a lot when you came ’round.”

“I did?” I turned my gaze back towards the girl, who was pointedly avoiding it. “...Mashiro?”

“Ugh. Please don’t say my name. It sounds so dirty coming out of your mouth.”

Clearly, she still hadn’t forgiven me.

“It is you. Woah, you’ve gotten so pretty that I didn’t even notice!”

Mashiro let out a small gasp, a faint blush playing on her pale skin. She clamped her teeth around her straw, sucking up her tomato juice even more violently, like an embarrassed vampire drinking blood.

Tsukinomori Mashiro. My uncle’s daughter and therefore my cousin.

Around ten years ago we saw each other almost every month. Her, her brother, and I would run and play outside. Once our respective parents got busier with work, though, we saw less and less of each other, especially since (as children) we couldn’t drive.

Last I heard, she was attending a posh all-girls school in the city. Which, now that I thought about it, made everything click into place.

The way she was dressed, and the way she held herself. It was all so incredibly *refined*.

“But what is Mashiro doing here?” I asked.

“Well, I brought her here. She was hiding in the bathroom this whole time, though. I dunno if she’s on her period or just constipated, but either way I guess it’s tough being a girl of her age.”

“Dad, please. That constitutes sexual harassment.”

“Aaah, a stab to my heart! You used to be so innocent, too. Is this your rebellious phase setting in, hm?”

“You kind of had that coming,” I chimed in.

“Yes, you did. Although it shouldn’t take a pervert like Aki to point that out.”

“Ugh... Okay, that was fair, but it still hurts... or maybe that’s why it hurts...”

It looked like I really was in her bad books, and possibly permanently. What hurt the most was that we used to get along just like brother and sister, and now she was treating me (deservedly so, admittedly) like trash. If I could, I wanted to make amends.

“Trust me, I would rather not be here either,” she said.

“C’mon, don’t be like that, Mashiro! I’m just worried about you, you know,” her father said.

“As if I’ll believe that, you dirty old man.”

“I may be a dirty old man, but I still care.”

My uncle began to fiddle with his mustache again, visibly concerned at his pouting daughter. It was already clear to me who wore the pants in this family.

“I guess I’ll just get to the point,” he finally said.

“Right.”

I was worried that Mashiro’s appearance would derail the entire encounter, but it seemed my uncle was back in business mode. I straightened up, suddenly nervous under Tsukinomori-san’s gaze.

“As I was saying. I would be happy to offer your ‘05th Floor Alliance’ a position at Honeyplace Works, under one condition...”

I suddenly noticed Mashiro twitch next to him. Though curious, I quickly turned my attention back to my (hopefully) future boss.

“I would like you to pretend to be Mashiro’s boyfriend until graduation.”

Huh?

Was this the real life? Was this just fantasy? Why was he trying to set me up to be the star of some sort of romantic comedy series? And not even an original one, at that.

Neither Mashiro nor I made a sound. The two of us were too consumed with shock. Though it took me a good few seconds, my uncle’s words finally rearranged themselves in my head to make sense.

“Come again?” I asked, just to be sure.

“I want you to be Mashiro’s fake boyfriend.”

Oh, so I hadn’t just hallucinated the last thirty seconds.

“This is so stupid,” Mashiro huffed. “I can’t believe you’re making me go through this nonsense.”

Thank goodness Mashiro was able to speak what was on my mind. I might have toned it down a bit myself, though.

“Mashiro! You will do as I say!” Tsukinomori-san slammed the table, turning so he could look his daughter directly in the eye. She turned her face away with a frown, but he continued. I could practically see the spit flying from his mouth. “I went through all that trouble to let you transfer to a public school, and you’re still not satisfied?! Listen! Those co-ed high-school boys, they’re sex-crazed maniacs! Do you even know what’s gonna happen to you if I don’t get you a bodyguard, huh?!”

“Yeah, a *bodyguard*, not a fake boyfriend. That’s just stupid.”

“No, it’s not! No one would wanna be your friend if you had an official bodyguard hanging around! I’m not about to let you get bullied just ‘cause I’m overprotective!”

“How about you just do nothing then?”

“No! Listen, Mashiro. Public school is a dangerous place. It’s a dark world full of perverted playboys. A naive and innocent little thing like you is gonna get eaten alive!”

“Hold on, we’re not all a bunch of low-level slimeballs!” I protested. “A-Anyway, does that mean that Mashiro’s transferring to my school?”

“Exactamundo, Akiteru-kun. I see you’re as perceptive as ever. The paperwork’s all in order, and she’ll be attending your school from tomorrow.”

“But why?” I couldn’t help but be curious. “Isn’t Mashiro’s old school really, really prestigious?”

The school in question was an all-girls university with a high school included. Attending that school was basically a one-way ticket to whichever elite university you wanted. As long as your behavior was good and your grades decent, you could get into college no problem. Getting into that school in the first place practically guaranteed you the best opportunities in life. So why on earth would Mashiro want to give all of that up for our school?

“Yes, but—” Tsukinomori-san began.

“S-Stop. I don’t want Aki to know.”

“It’s unfair not to tell him, especially if he’s gonna be doing this favor for you.” My uncle ignored Mashiro’s pleas as she tugged on his sleeve and stared down at the table. Though he looked a little hesitant, he continued nevertheless. “The truth is, her attendance isn’t great...”

“You mean she’s been skipping?” I asked.

“Well, to put it bluntly... yes.” My uncle nodded, glancing at Mashiro, who was holding her knees and biting her lip.

She wasn’t looking our way at all, and her eyelashes were trembling. It seemed she really didn’t want anyone to know about this.

“It’s a long story, but...”

“You don’t need to explain.”

Mashiro looked up and blinked at me in surprise, as though perplexed at my words. She watched me warily like a small rabbit, no doubt wondering why I didn’t seem curious about her circumstances.

“So she had poor attendance, and now wants to make a new start by transferring. That’s all I need to know. Asking for any more than that would just be nosy.”

I prided myself on living as efficiently as possible. I considered sticking my nose or meddling in other people’s affairs to be a waste of time. Sure, I didn’t mind helping them out, but that didn’t mean it was necessary for me to know *why* they needed help.

“Aki...”

“Oho. That’s very decent of you.”

Mashiro looked surprised as her uncle shot me a genuine smile.

“I understand the condition, and I understand your concern. But... I’m sort of worried about how us acting as a couple might affect our relations with our classmates, even if it is just an act,” I said.

“Don’t worry about that! Having a boyfriend is a status symbol in high school. In fact, I’d be more worried about how Mashiro would fare *without* a boyfriend!”

“Sounds like your own high school life was pretty tough, huh?”

“Come now. I’ve been popular with the ladies since the day I was born!”

I wasn’t about to ask him about the details of his birth to make sure he really remembered it right. I *was* curious about his mysterious high school days, but that could wait.

“I take it this condition is non-negotiable?”

“Yup.”

Dammit.

I could easily see this being one of his stupid pranks, but it looked like I was unlucky this time. The glimmer in his eyes was 100% serious. Even if he was still joking around about it, he must have had a good reason for wanting to entrust Mashiro to me like this, and that reason might have something to do with why she skipped school so often. I still wasn’t going to ask about that, though. Not because I considered myself to be above such things, but because the only thing I cared about right now was securing my group’s future.

“I accept your condition.”

The rest was up to Mashiro.

Her eyes opened wide, as though she couldn’t believe my acceptance. For a while, she sat there in thought. She muttered to herself so quietly that I couldn’t hear, shooting me dirty glances all the while.

“I guess it’s fine... if we’re just pretending. Plus it means I can transfer... Even though I hate everything about this, I guess I’ll play along.”

Seemed I wasn’t the only one who stood to benefit from this arrangement. This meeting wasn’t just for my uncle to lay down his condition, but so that Mashiro could negotiate the terms with him.

She was probably as shocked as I was by the whole “fake relationship” thing, although she accepted right away when she realized it would be to her advantage. I guess we had that in common.

Since we were on the same page, I could be completely honest with her.

“Let’s make the best of it, okay, Mashiro?”

“Don’t get too used to it, toilet boy. We’re just pretending. There’s no reason for me to be nice to you when nobody’s watching.”

“Makes sense, I guess.”

Needless to say, she slapped away my outstretched hand rather than shaking it. I couldn’t remember ever having a handshake rejected in such an unambiguous manner before. I guess I was just lucky not to be in a jail cell right now, considering what happened half an hour before.

“Oh, what an adorable widdle couple! Your future together looks bright!”

“How did you come to that conclusion?”

“Are you already getting cataracts, Dad?”

“See! You’re already on the same wavelength!” Tsukinomori-san laughed. “Oh, one more thing, Akiteru-kun.”

“Hm?”

“Remember that this is all a ruse. If you even lay a finger on Mashiro, I’ll... Well, I don’t think I have to tell you.”

I felt a chill run down my spine at the look in his eyes.

To be honest, if he was really that concerned, he shouldn’t have set up this whole thing in the first place. Maybe if this were a romantic comedy novel or something, we would end up in a happy marriage, but real life was never so convenient.

“Don’t worry. She hates my guts.”

“Hmph.”

It was impossible for love to bloom from the soil of intense hatred.

“Well, enjoy your fake love life! It all kicks off tomorrow!” My uncle grinned.

“Yes, sir.”

He slapped me on the back with a little more force than was necessary. Or perhaps I just imagined it.

And so I began my new life as Mashiro’s fake boyfriend, all for a position at the elite Honeyplace Works.

“So what do you think about fake relationships, Ozu?”

“What, like in movies and stuff? They always get together in the end, right? You never heard of enemies-to-lovers?”

“Okay, but imagine that the girl is like... super not into you. And also it’s real life.”

“Sounds like the start of a healthy and wholesome relationship to me, bro!”

“...Huh?”



AKI

Hey, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, how are the illustrations going?



AKI

Hey, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, how are the illustrations going? (The deadline's tomorrow!)



AKI

Hey, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, how are the illustrations going? (The DEADline's tomorrow!)



AKI

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. How. Are. The. Illustrations. Going.



Makigai Namako

Imao



OZ

Maybe she died already



AKI

She hasn't seen the messages.



Makigai Namako

This isn't very professional...



AKI

She'll have to face me eventually, so I don't get why she's hiding now?



Makigai Namako

That's just how humans are. They like to put off unpleasant stuff for as long as possible, even if it's inevitable...



05th Floor Alliance (4)



...



AKI

I'm pretty sure you've never missed a deadline, Namako-sensei.



AKI

Thanks for that, by the way.



Makigai Namako

It's all part of being a genius!



AKI

Too bad Murasaki Shikibu doesn't meet deadlines, otherwise she'd definitely be good enough to be called a genius.



Makigai Namako

Oh god. You're so mad you're not even calling her "sensei" anymore, huh?



Makigai Namako

Genius or not, there's definitely something wrong with her brain. Especially the part that deals with attraction.



OZ

She still hasn't replied...



Makigai Namako

I checked and her phone's off!



AKI

Fine. But if she doesn't get back to me by tomorrow...



AKI

s h e ' s g o n n a h a v e a b a d t i m e .

Chapter 4: My Hot Teacher Has a Thing for Me

“My name is Tsukinomori Mashiro. Um... I-I’ll be in your class from now on. And, also, um... I-I’m going out with Ooboshi Akiteru-kun...”

I knew from that moment that the day would hold nothing but trouble.

The brand-new gorgeous transfer student had just declared in her ten-second introduction that we were dating. The entire class turned to look at me, their faces reminiscent of skydivers who only just noticed mid-flight that they didn’t have parachutes.

“Ooboshi... Seriously?!”

“A stunner like her is going out with... *him*?”

“Dammit! Shut down at the first hurdle!”

“Wait. Who’s Ooboshi again?”

The room erupted with questions and doubts, but the resentment in each and every voice was unmistakable.

Also, what was up with that last guy not knowing his own classmate’s name? If probably-Suzuki caught wind of this, I was sure he’d be outraged!

I couldn’t believe the attention I was suddenly getting just because I had a “girlfriend” now, when I was so average in every sense of the word. These guys were seriously too obsessed with that sort of thing.

“H-Hi, Tsukinomori-san! I have a question! Where did you and Ooboshi-kun first meet?”

“Huh? Oh, um... In a bathroom.”

“Huh?”

Oh my God. *Please*, think before you speak.

It wasn’t even true! We met way before last night! You know, like ten years ago? Maybe put that pretty little head of yours to use and come up with an actual good answer!

“A-Actually, I forgot! So, um... Don’t ask me ever again please!”

Mashiro bowed her head, then scampered off towards her seat without taking any further questions. A wave of disappointed murmurings swept over the class, but thankfully they dropped the subject. I was once again reminded of the reality of the situation.

People were a lot more reasonable in real life than say, in anime, where they would definitely have questioned her within an inch of her

life about our relationship. Though all eyes were on me for a little bit, everyone would soon forget about us and move on with their own lives.

There was, of course, a risk of the boys simping for her, considering how cute she was, but none of them would be stupid enough to bother since she had a boyfriend. Ashamed to admit it as I was, my uncle's reasoning was sort of beginning to make sense. I supposed he wasn't the CEO of a global enterprise for nothing.

Mashiro gracefully took her seat at the desk next to mine, keeping her head down bashfully. The seat had been free for some time, and I suddenly wondered just how far my uncle's reach extended. Maybe he had something on the principal. I knew *I* wouldn't want to be blackmailed by someone like him.

"We'll get through this somehow."

I shot my neighbor a sympathetic smile. The nervous look on her face disappeared into thin air.

"Don't talk to me, toilet troll. Don't think I forgot what you did."

Her frosty glare chilled me to the core.

"You were doing a great job of playin' the innocent shy girl up there. What's with the attitude now?"

"Oh, it's nothing, really. Just that I hate you and everything about you."

"Uh... You're s'posed to be pretending to be my girlfriend, y'know."

"Oh, these ignorant plebs won't notice, as long as we keep up appearances when they're watching. In the meantime, I'd appreciate it if you just left me alone. Don't even look at me."

"Th-That might be kinda tough, don't you think?"

We were whispering to each other, just to make sure no one would hear us. It would probably be safer to at least *pretend* we were getting along, even when we thought no one was watching, but it looked like Mashiro wasn't willing to play ball.

"D'you think they're really dating?"

I could already hear the dubious whispers of our classmates. I hate to say I told you so, but...

"She looks super pissed! Like she hates him or something!"

"Oh my God dude, this is why you're still a virgin! Couples fight sometimes, y'know? I mean, your parents are at each other's throats all the time!"

"Oh yeah! Makes sense. I guess they really are a couple."

I did say whispers, didn't I? Because I could hear every last word.

I was just glad they were so dense. Just like Mashiro, I was starting to think that we really could fool them.

However, even if we could trick the masses, the few friends I had

were another matter. One of them was leaning forward from behind me now, whispering into my ear.

"I didn't know you had a girlfriend! How come you were keepin' it a secret?"

"I'll explain later, Ozu, but it's not what you think."

"Thought so. Did seem kinda sus."

"Glad you think so. It saves a lotta time."

"Is it to do with... y'know?"

"Yeah."

Ozu was as perceptive as they came. He already knew about my negotiations with Tsukinomori-san. After all, it concerned his future too.

He was one of the major players in the group I was trying to get into Honeyplace Works, as well as the biggest reason I was doing this, and so it'd be unfair not to explain this mess properly to him. The problem was just *how* I was going to explain.

"I'll tell you more later, but basically I just gotta pretend to be her boyfriend."

That seemed like a good enough way to sum it up. Ozu burst into laughter.

"What is this? Some kinda romantic comedy?"

"Says the guy who was called in by the super-hot student council president the other day."

"Huh? She just wanted me to look at the student council computer 'cause it was busted."

"Yeah, but she asked *you* when she coulda asked anyone else, or even someone from her grade. She's gotta be interested in you."

"It'd be dumb to get my hopes up over a stupid computer problem."

"That's not all, though. What about that weird girl who bumped into you at the mall outside the station? Y'know, the crazy one who swiped some sweet bread? Haven't you been running into her all the time lately?"

"I did bump into her at the station the other day, I guess. She wanted me to buy her some more sweet bread."

"Dude, that's when you say 'yes' and then you get onto her route."

"Bro, she's insane! She was askin' me for food when she met me like, one time before that. Don'tcha think that's super fishy?"

"So you didn't buy her any?"

"Duh. I reported her to the police straight away."

Model citizen, Kohinata Ozuma.

"Even VN protagonists aren't *that* dense. At this rate, you're gonna get a bad end."

"C'mon, you're making way too big a deal of this." Ozu grinned at

me.

Everyone in this life can be categorized as a main character, or a side character.

There was no doubt in my mind that Kohinata Ozuma was the former, and one of the chosen few. Everything I'd seen over the three years I spent by his side 100% belonged in a romantic comedy series.

It was like he met a brand-new hot girl every single week, and I'm talking the kind of hot that most of us could only hope to meet once in a lifetime, if at all. They came from all over: on the street, in school, or online. Not only that, but it was so obvious that every single one of them was into him.

It wasn't like Ozu was going out looking for these girls, either. He didn't have any interest in romance. All he cared about was his own hobbies like programming, anime, and making games. In fact, he was basically the king of all geeks.

He met all these new girls so often, completely by accident, and he wasn't even aware of it. And now he was trying to tell me his life *wasn't* a romantic comedy?

"All you need now is an affectionate little sister. Too bad you got Iroha instead."

"She's into *you* anyway. Doesn't that make *your* life a romantic comedy?"

"Like I told ya a hundred times, she is *not*."

Every girl in my life hated my guts. Iroha did her best to wind me up at every opportunity, and I still didn't dare to look in Mashiro's direction, mainly because I valued my life.

My relationship with girls was pretty sad, now that I thought about it.

"All I'm sayin' is that I don't wanna hear *you* callin' *me* dense ever again," Ozu finally said.

"Whatever. Maybe when Iroha starts acting like a high-schooler in love, I'll actually believe you."

I decided to keep an eye on the news later, just in case there was any talk of hell freezing over.

The first period passed agonizingly slowly, but pass it did, and it was eventually break time.

Since Mashiro was the new girl, she didn't yet have a textbook of her own, and so I had to share mine with her. It wasn't fun. Whenever my hand bumped into the A.T. Field around her, she would begin to growl and glare at me.

Knowing that the next five periods would be more of the same, I felt my heart sink into a murky depression. Not only that, but the stress could adversely affect my own studies, making it a lose-lose situation. I was starting to wonder whether doing all this for the sake

of my future was even worth it. It was as these gloomy thoughts battered my mind that I noticed a guy approaching with a grin plastered on his face.

It was creepy as all hell. Whatever he wanted, I could immediately tell it wasn't good. Anyone could.

"Sup, Ooboshi. Didn't know you had a girlfriend."

"Yeah..." I gave as innocuous an answer as I could.

"Isn't there that cute kouhai you're always hangin' out with though? I thought *she* was your girlfriend."

What a stand-up guy, saying all this in front of my "real" girlfriend. Incredible. I guess it was just lucky that fake girlfriends felt no jealousy. Also, what did he mean by "cute"?

I couldn't work out what his aim was. Either he was just a flat-out dumbass, or he was trying to cause trouble between Mashiro and me. Whichever it was, it was annoying.

"Huh? You mean Ozu's sister? Yeah, I kinda know her, but we're not that close."

"Really? You *act* like you're close. Didn't she come to the classroom just for you the other day?"

"She wanted some advice, that's all. Something she couldn't ask Ozu."

"I dunno, man, seems kinda fishy to me... Like, *real* fishy."

Ugh. Who was this guy, acting like it was any of his business? It was starting to piss me off, and so I devised a scheme to get out of this as soon as I could.

"Look, I get it. Gossip is addictive, and you want as much as you can get your hands on. But lemme tell you something."

"Yeah? What?"

"You're interested in Kageishi-sensei, right?"

"Huh? How d'ya know?"

Dude, everyone knows.

Even if Ozu was my only friend, I still had regular powers of observation. There is nothing more powerful in this society of ours than information. I always had my ears peeled, since there was no telling when something would come in handy, and it wasn't like it expended too much energy. I wasn't about to give away too many of my secrets, though.

"It's a pretty big rumor, y'know."

"Well, you know how it is... that cold gaze of hers. It's like, being scolded by her just once would be life-changin', y'know?"

"Don't you wanna know what kinda guy she's into?"

"Uh, I guess. But it's not like I'm gonna ask her."

"I already know. I heard it from one of the other teachers."

"No way! You gotta tell me! C'mon! I'll do anything!"

Gottem.

Though I worried for his future, if it was this easy to trick him.

“She likes men who like muscular men.”

“She... come again?”

“She likes men who like muscular men.”

“Oh, right. You mean she likes muscular men.”

“No, no. She likes men who like muscular men. Men who like muscles on other men.”

“Muscular?”

“Yeah, muscular.”

“So what you’re sayin’ is... if I make a show of *really* being into muscular men...”

“Kageishi-sensei’s heart is yours.”

“Yeah booooooooooooooooooooooooooy!”

We high-fived.

My head hurt from having such a dumb conversation. Even if it was necessary to get him off my back, it was still super cringey.

At least from tomorrow on he would be shunned as somebody ridiculously interested in hunky men, which would stop him crawling up the social ladder to steal my most average of seats.

I saw him off as he skipped back to his desk with a prayer in my heart.

May the thin shreds remaining of your dignity be blessed.

It was then that I felt somebody watching me from the next desk over. Somebody being Mashiro, of course. Her eyes were stuck to me like glue. She was probably appalled at the kind of conversation I was capable of.

I was appalled, too, so I hoped she could just forget about it. I sent the message across with my own gaze.

She immediately scoffed and looked away, which was a complete surprise... *not*.

I instantly decided never to stoop to that level ever again, even if it was for the greater good. Not that I expected Mashiro to treat me any differently either way.

Oh, how wrong I was.

After witnessing what she had, Mashiro’s attitude towards me in the second period was even worse, which I didn’t even realize was possible. She outright stole my textbook from me and replaced it with a light novel, as though inviting me to amuse myself while she actually got on with work.

Since I wasn’t able to do anything else, I read it, finishing the whole thing by the time the lesson was over. It was one of those standard romantic comedies with a dense protagonist. I could take it

or leave it, to be honest, but I did wonder why Mashiro picked it out for me. After class, it was time for another break.

“I’m hungry. Buy me a rice ball. Make sure it’s some sort of fish flavor, too.”

“Hey, I’m not runnin’ a delivery service here.”

“You should be willing to do this much for your girlfriend. Or do you just want to call the whole thing off?”

“Fine... I’ll get you one.”

And so off I embarked to buy my fake girlfriend some food. She continued to make unreasonable demands, treat me like dirt, and insult me all the way up until the third period.

I knew the whole thing was awkward as hell, but that didn’t mean she had to act like this towards me. She’d been so reserved and cute when we were young, too, so it was a real shame. What had happened between then and now for her to end up like this? Even first period had been bearable, at least. It was only after the break that her mood worsened.

Was she jealous because that guy had talked about me and Iroha? Nah, couldn’t be.

Maybe if she were my real girlfriend she’d react this way, but she wasn’t. Plus there was the small matter of her hating me with the intensity of a thousand suns. There was no reason for her to be jealous.

I didn’t know the passing of time could be so brutal. The small, puppy-like girl who would waddle after me wherever I went was now a harsh mistress with a heart of stone, who treated others around her like a slave the moment her mood turned south.

She was just as annoying as Iroha, except in a whole different way. I was *not* looking forward to having to do this with her all the way up until graduation. But if I didn’t, what would happen to me and my friends?

While I was busy lamenting my future, time ticked by, and before long it was already the start of the fourth period. The moment the bell chimed for the start of the lesson, the room fell into an immediate silence.

That’s right. It wasn’t just Mashiro who demanded unfettered worship. It was time to welcome the Venomous Queen to the classroom, who would no doubt rule it with her usual iron fist.

The door crashed open.

Everybody froze where they were.

Even the relentless, overbearing crack of her heels on the floor did nothing to break down the thick tension in the room.

Her hair, done up in a meticulous bun, bounced with every step

she took. Kageishi Sumire rapped her knuckles on the teacher's desk, before sweeping her gaze over the silent classroom without a word. The students were frozen stiff under her venomous gaze.

"I am glad you have evolved past the stage of monkeys." The tiniest of smiles played at her lips as she realized she had everyone under her complete control. "Class starts now. Page 127. Cubic equations."

Sumire cracked a ruler down on the desk. All forty students in the room pulled out their textbooks in perfect synchrony.

Peculiar as her mannerisms were, Sumire's classes started like any other. It was only at this point that things started to get strange.

"All right, question time. If there was something you didn't understand, put your hand up now."

A ripple swept through the class.

We were used to this now, since it was halfway through the first semester, but at first it had thrown everybody off guard. Usually, teachers would explain the contents of the textbook before asking if there were any questions. Kageishi Sumire did the opposite.

"There's no point in reading out the textbook like the other teachers do. They're no better than tape recorders. I assume you can all read, so read by yourselves. It's the teacher's job to explain what you still can't understand."

That was what she said in our first ever lesson with her. I remember being impressed; it certainly sounded like an effective way of teaching.

But, of course, not every student was as well-prepared as me.

There was one boy—a serious, glasses-wearing student—who claimed he forgot to read the textbook before coming to class, for example.

He was clearly just trying to make a point.

He was one of the brightest in the class, and I was pretty sure he'd never missed an assignment in his life. He didn't forget. He purposely didn't do the reading. It was obvious just what kind of stunt he was trying to pull.

"I was just hoping you might be able to teach us properly, instead of using these unorthodox methods."

It was mutiny!

Sumire watched him carefully for a time before letting out a small sigh.

"A pity. You'll have to read it later."

His mutiny attempt was completely ignored.

"I-I just think it's weird not to go through the material in class. In fact, I've never met a teacher who 'teaches' like this."

"That doesn't surprise me. I base my teaching on different values

from most teachers.”

“B-But that’s just reckless!” he protested. “It’s like you don’t even want to be here!”

“I’m reckless? What about failing to review the material before class, *like I asked you to?*”

The student had no comeback for her whatsoever. Sumire took this as her cue to continue.

“If you wish to require hand-holding your entire lives and end up living in poverty, go right ahead. However, I am not prepared to take responsibility for *your* actions. I shall teach and lead my students to success in my own way. That is the only responsibility I have.”

The student could do nothing but grumble.

“Making good on your word. Self-discipline. Reporting mistakes to your superiors immediately. These are all qualities you will need in the real world. If you don’t learn this now, your future will be very bleak indeed.”

“N-Ngh...”

“Remember that if you have any hopes of making it in life. Now sit down.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am...”

The student shriveled back into his chair. There was no gleam of confidence in the eyes behind those glasses now. Meanwhile, Sumire was as eloquent as ever. She didn’t pull her punches when it came to backing up her arguments.

“Okay. Next question.”

The tension in the room stayed high throughout the lesson. The single hour seemed to stretch on for two, perhaps even three, until the bell finally set us free.

“Time’s up. Read up to page 135 for next time. Goodbye.”

Just like that, the frozen air in the room began to melt.

Sumire packed up the materials in front of her and made for the door. But just before she opened it, she turned and looked in my direction. There was a ripple of surprise through the room as students turned to look at me. I could feel thirty-nine pairs of curious eyes burning into my skin.

I was starting to get used to this sort of thing.

“Ooboshi-kun. Come see me in the counseling office at lunch.”

“Why?” I asked.

“To discuss the assignment, of course,” she explained in a low voice, while at the same time staring daggers at me.

“Ah. Of course.”

“Don’t be late.”

With a few more loud clacks of her high heels, she was gone. The

class remained silent until the sound of her footsteps had faded completely.

“You gonna be okay, Ooboshi?”

“Huh? Why?”

It was Takahashi who had spoken, a student I didn’t really talk much to. In fact, his name might not have been Takahashi at all. Though he sat away from most of the popular kids, he was still one of them.

“She wants to see you in the counseling office all by yourself. You musta done something huge!”

I just wished people would leave me alone, though I guess I couldn’t blame him for being curious.

The counseling room was famous for being the most dangerous part of Sumire’s territory. Students who were failing or were repeatedly late were called there for “re-education.” It was impossible to look into the room from the outside, so what actually happened during these sessions couldn’t be verified. Although, I did hear rumors of one guy who went in with a mohawk and covered in piercings, but came out with a shaved head and round, teary eyes.

Not only was it said that she kept all sorts of “training” equipment in there, but the room was totally soundproof and blocked any sort of internet signal. I wouldn’t be surprised if she had it arranged that she could claim extraterritorial rights in response to any accusations that arose.

It was no wonder that the Venomous Queen herself summoning me there caused a stir. But it wasn’t nearly as big a deal to me personally.

“Yeah... she’s probably set up the guillotine, ready to take my head,” I replied casually.

“How come you’re not freaking out?”

“Because it’ll take more than that to kill me,” I said, standing up from my seat.

“You sure it’s gonna be okay?” Ozu asked from behind me.

“Et tu, Ozu? Don’t worry, I won’t be long.”

“I-If you say so.” He gave me a poorly-concealed anxious smile and waved a trembling hand at me.

Meanwhile, I prepared myself for war.

I couldn’t wait for the Venomous Queen to show me what she had.

“Pardon me.”

I gave the standard three knocks along with a polite greeting. I then waited for the smooth voice from inside to give me permission to

enter before opening the door.

The first thing I noticed upon entering was the brass bull statue: an actual brazen bull. I would just love to be tortured by that thing. Kappa. The brazen bull was one of the cruelest torture devices throughout history. If the PTA caught wind of this, the school would have a super hard time trying to explain themselves.

That wasn't the only torture device looming in the room. Not only that, but the lights were off, making everything gloomy aside from the old-fashioned candle and its flickering flame.

Kageishi Sumire stood at the end of the room as though nothing was wrong, right in front of the defendant's chair.

"You're early. You must be looking forward to the execution," she said.

"I don't like to waste time, no matter how little."

I ignored Sumire's chuckle as I walked by, then sat down in the chair. The next moment, a bloodcurdling crack pierced through the air as she slammed her heel on the ground.

"I'm so sorry, Akiteru-sama!"

She was on her hands and knees, slamming her head down so hard that it was denting the floor. If you looked up the word "apology" in any Japanese dictionary, you'd probably see a picture matching this scene exactly.

"It appears you understand the weight of your crime, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei."

"Y-Your eyes are... so cold!"

"Of course. I was so looking forward to your execution that I came as soon as I could."

"B-B-But I've been so busy with the tests, that I haven't had time to do the illustrations!"

"Busy, huh? Why have I heard you've been watching 'My Honey' live, then?"

"I-I'm allowed to have hobbies!"

"I wonder if you'll be able to meet your deadlines if I smash up your TV satellite."

"Wh-What?! No! Please! I need anime to live!"

"You're right. I wouldn't go that far... I wonder what the rest of the class would think if they saw you like this."

Kageishi Sumire. Also known by her pen name: Murasaki Shikibu-sensei.

The Venomous Queen, who preached to her students about how important it was to succeed in society, was also an illustrator who had never managed to keep to a deadline in her entire life.

This would probably be a good time to mention that all these torture devices were actually detailed replicas which she used as

references for her drawings. They were here so that she could draw at work; without the school knowing, of course.

“If you pigs don’t know how to read a clock, then I suggest you pack your bags and get out of here immediately.’ Remember that?”

“Hngh...”

“Every human starts as a worthless pig. Once you learn how to dance to society’s tune, you become a monkey. You lot are still far off from becoming full-fledged humans.”

“Hnghngh...”

“Making good on your word. Self-discipline. Reporting mistakes to your superiors immediately. If you don’t learn this now, your future will be very bleak indeed.”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Th-That’s all just an act! I’m just messing around! I-I don’t do it because I crave power or anything, I swear!” the Venomous Queen wailed with tears streaming down her cheeks and mucus dripping from her nose.

I was literally so close to taking a picture and sending it to the class group chat.

The group chat that I wasn’t part of...

She should count her lucky stars that I didn’t have any friends.

“You talk pretty big in front of the class, don’t you?”

“I’m a teacher!” she protested. “It’s my job to be strict! I don’t want all the jocks and delinquents to realize they can push me around! My authority would shatter!”

“What makes you think that? Our class is pretty chill, you know.”

“It happens in practically every manga with a teacher protagonist!”

“Right, in manga, maybe...”

Those manga required insane classes to make the plot interesting. Though I doubt explaining this to her would work, seeing as she seemed to believe that manga was a quality source of information in the first place.

“And to think I actually like your style of teaching...”

I didn’t see the point in teachers who simply copied the textbook’s contents to the board. It was a much better use of time to have the students read up ahead of class. After that, you could pick the teacher’s brains for anything you needed, rather than having them repeat the information that was already available to you. It was much more efficient.

I just hoped that me admitting to liking it wasn’t going to come back and bite me in the ass one day.

“Anyway,” I continued, “how many of the drawings have you done? I want a progress report.”

“Oh, um. Well...” Sumire pulled out a tablet PC and shot me her

sweetest smile. "I've done this much!"

The screen was blank.

"That's it. Get in the bull."

"Noooooooo! Not the bull!"

"You've done nothing! You've got nothing but rough sketches right now! How did you think this would fly?!"

"It's not my faaaaaaault!" she whined. "I just have a case of artist's block!"

"In that case you need to tell us! Not wait until it's too late!"

"But I can't just tell you that I'm struggling! It'll ruin my good image!"

"You don't even have a good image to ruin!"

"Owie! Owie! Ow! I'm sorry! Please stop! Not my pressure points! Aaaaah! Aaah! I'm gonna breeeeaaak!"

I stuck my fingers right where she was most sensitive. Sumire screamed and gasped before collapsing to the floor. Her hips twitched while she supported herself on all fours. Meanwhile, the expression on her face didn't lose to any hentai heroine.

By the way, you know those pressure points right on your shoulders? That's where I was pushing. It worked better than I expected. In my quest for keeping my body working as efficiently as possible, I was already well-versed in all the human pressure points.

"I don't think anybody'd believe this is what you're really like."

"U-Ugh... D-Don't tell... them..."

"I guess I should've known from the moment we met..."

I looked down at the teacher on the floor below me, and began a trip down memory lane.

It all started during summer vacation last year.

On that day, the weather forecast announced that Japan was officially experiencing the worst heat wave in years.

I could well believe it as I grumbled from the heat and took my seat on the train to get to Tokyo Big Sight. I was on my way to Comiket, an event which boasted a long history and was overflowing with all kinds of talent.

My goal was to hunt for illustrators there. Ozu and I had refined the basic setting of our game, and we were now searching for people who could help flesh it out with scenarios and illustrations.

Well, I knew I was probably biting off more than I could chew. I was still a high-school student, after all. What sort of professional, or even semi-professional, would trust me?

I raced around from booth to booth anyway, handing out my card to anybody who looked good, even though it was obvious they

thought I was just messing around or something from the looks I got.

The first two days were a bust, but that didn't put me off trying for the third. After seventy-eight quasi-polite rejections, I finally met her.

It was at a booth selling doujinshi based on popular shounen shows. The covers of the books depicted young boys being toyed with by voluptuous women. Red-blooded male as I was, I felt a shock seeing those young boys in such provocative situations. But despite my aversion to the materials, I could already sense it, just by seeing these realistic-looking young boys with their older partners.

These guys had talent.

I searched up the name of the group and the illustrator there and then, but all I got back was their group webpage, and there was nothing to suggest that their work was being used or sold in any official capacity.

In other words, the goods on the stall were all they had. They had no contracts with official retailers or companies and were a solely independent group. My heart began to pound excitedly.

To think that a group this talented hadn't been picked up by anyone yet! This convention really was teeming with skilled artists.

"Excuse me. Is the artist for these comics here?" I hurriedly asked the sales girl.

I wasn't sure if she was a cosplayer they'd hired, or just a friend of theirs. She glanced behind her nervously.

"U-Um, there's someone... someone who wants to see you..." she called out timidly.

"A publisher?" The woman turned around. "I'm flattered, however..."

The moment she saw my face, she froze. I froze.

Who would've thought that the most feared math teacher in our school would be drawing erotic comics featuring middle-school boys and older women (who, for all I knew now, could be their teachers)?

"Of course you didn't have any professional experience; as a teacher, you're not allowed to have a side job. To be honest, it's already kinda sketchy that you're making money off doujinshi in the first place."

"W-Well, I can't give them away for free! The doujinshi market would crash! It's important to have respect for others in the trade, you know, especially at an event like that!"

"At least that part of your personality is admirable."

It showed a lot of confidence, too. Confidence that her work was too good to just give away for free. Incidentally, I agreed with her

there.

The quality of “Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s” shota erotica was unbelievably high. It was the kind of work I’d expect to see on the cover of an adult manga magazine. I just couldn’t get my head around why such a talented illustrator was working such a wholesome job as “high-school math teacher.”

“I still feel really lucky to have met you there. I managed to get myself a super-talented artist from it, after all. And if you refused, I could simply show everyone your work.”

“Ugh... What kind of despicable student blackmails their own teacher?”

“You were the one taking such a huge risk in the first place, although I’d have to commend you for not going forward and signing up with any publishers. If anyone finds out what sort of stuff you’re into, you’re finished.”

By day, she was a math teacher.

By night, she drew shota porn.

What was worse, was that most of the stories in those comics involved female teachers seducing their innocent students. The boys ranged from elementary to high-school students, but that didn’t make things any better.

“And to top it all off, it turned out that you lived on the same floor of my apartment building!”

“It’s a curse!” she wailed. “First I have to deal with you at school, and now you’re even sticking your nose into my home life!”

Our group’s name, 05th Floor Alliance, came from the fact that most of our members lived on the same floor in the same apartment building, by complete chance. Only the lead scenario writer, Makigai Namako-sensei, lived pretty far away. There was actually a free apartment on the floor, and I’d thought about asking him to move there, but in the end I decided it was probably a little much. As a professional, he was already doing us a big enough favor by writing the story for us.

I’ve also heard that isolation is good for the creative process. Him living so far away was probably what was getting us such great and original work from him.

So anyway, that was the reasoning behind the name of our group. Just in case you were curious at all.

“All right. Let’s get back to the matter at hand here.” I folded one leg over the other as I sat in my chair, looking down at Sumire who was kneeling before me on the floor. “You know what to do if you don’t want your little secret getting out, don’t you?”

“I-I’ll... I’ll draw,” she said hoarsely, pressing her forehead into the floor again before lifting it up almost immediately. “I swear the whole

artist's block thing is true, though! I promise I'll give you your drawings, if you help me snap out of it!"

"I guess that's part of my job too. All right. I'll do anything I need to, if it means you'll get those illustrations done."

"Anything?"

"Anything within my power. Except extending your deadline, of course."

"I wouldn't ask something so outrageous. But there is something you could do for me... right now." Sumire's lips curled into a seductive smile. "Drop those pants, and show me the goods."

Silence. And then...

"Hello? Police?"

"Noooooooooooo! Not the police! I'll be fired! Please! Come on! I need this paycheck!"

"Shut up, you perv! You can't complain about me calling the police on you after what you just said!"

"I didn't mean it like that! I don't usually draw older men, you know? I can draw young boys fine, but if you really want me to make these drawings, I need some kind of reference!"

It was hard to believe that she was supposed to be the adult here with all that whining. Also, her excuse was sus as hell.

"It's not like I'm asking you to draw any nudity, though! Why would you need to see my 'goods'?"

"It's called anatomy! I need a naked reference to work out what a character will look like with clothes on!"

"Sure, that much makes sense..."

"I know there are people who don't need references for that sort of thing, but I'm not one of them! Cutting corners will only lead to a drop in quality, and I'm not prepared to risk it." Her tone of voice was suddenly much more serious than it was before.

Despite her strange set of interests, I knew she genuinely wanted her work to be the best it could be, and I wanted to respect that.

"That explains about 95% of the reasoning behind your request. Where's the other 5% coming from?"

"I was just thinking that I might never get the chance to lay my eyes on a high-schooler's meat ever again..."

"Nine... one... one—"

"I'm joking! It was a joke! Look, I'm laughing! Ha ha ha!"

"Jokes are supposed to be funny!" Maybe the string of sleepless nights was really starting to get to her head. That might also be why her treatment of our class had been particularly harsh lately.

"Just get some sleep for now, all right?" I sighed.

"I'll sleep. Just don't do anything to me, okay? I'm not really into anyone over the age of fifteen."

“I wasn’t planning to do anything.” Even though she was my teacher and I wouldn’t want to anyway, the rejection was still painful in its own right. “Just get some sleep so you can get back the little sanity you had. I’m guessing you haven’t slept much because of this whole artist’s block thing you’ve got going on.”

“Stop trying to be all nice. It’s weird.”

“Quit trying to start a fight, then!”

“I wasn’t! I was just saying! It’s not my fault!”

“Your words *are* your responsibility!”

“It’s just weird how it’s like you know about my whole sleeping thing and I didn’t even tell you.”

“I’ve talked to you almost every day for a year. I know what you’re like.”

“Even then... but you’re right, I haven’t slept in days.” Sumire put her head in her hands and sighed.

When melancholy struck, she actually looked quite attractive. Maybe it’d be better for her if she stayed depressed her whole life.

“Just sleep,” I repeated. “Sleep, get some sugar into your system, do some jumping jacks, and then get drawing. You can have twelve extra hours on your deadline.”

“Thanks...”

“See you later.”

I didn’t want to stick around. The longer I spent here, the worse the rumors would be.

I got up from the defendant’s chair (although by now I should probably be calling it a “throne”), waved a hand, and got ready to leave my perverted math teacher behind.

“Wait. There’s something else,” she called out from behind me.

“Something else? Something else you need to apologize for?” I asked.

“No! Why do you always have to assume the worst?!”

“Experience. Now what is it?”

“It’s about Tsukinomori Mashiro-chan.”

“Oh?”

“Bear in mind that I’m saying this as your teacher, and not Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. I’ve heard that the two of you are dating.”

“We’re not.”

“Hm. Didn’t think so.”

Apparently, she didn’t think I was capable of getting myself a girlfriend. Why was everyone in the 05th Floor Alliance so cruel?

“It was a condition put to me by her dad,” I said. “A condition so we can get what we want.”

“That makes sense.” Sumire gave a nod. Then, she bowed her head, a little more sincerely this time. “I know you’re doing this for

us... so thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’d never leave you guys behind. It basically guarantees us a job at Honeyplace Works. You’re already a teacher, so you’ve got your hands tied. It only makes sense that I should do what you can’t.”

“That’s true.”

“I hate waste of any kind, but especially wasted talent. I swear I’ll get you out of the job you hate so much. And I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Sumire looked down at the floor. I got the sense she wanted to say more, but she kept quiet. I wasn’t about to push her, either, and decided to pretend not to notice.

“We were given strict instructions on how to treat her,” Sumire said. “To make sure she sat next to you, to keep her away from any problem students, things like that. But there was also something else.”

“They told you she used to be a shut-in before she transferred, right?”

“Oh, so you knew. Do you know why?”

“I didn’t ask. I didn’t think it was any of my business.”

“I feel that you need to know.” Sumire brought her face closer to mine and lowered her voice. “She was bullied.”

I knew it.

There were many reasons why people decided to shut themselves off from the outside world in general, but not many that would apply to Mashiro.

Bullying was the first conclusion my mind had jumped to.

“She was keeping a secret from her class, but it got out,” Sumire continued, “and that was what led to the bullying.”

“A secret?”

“Even the people in charge of her transfer don’t know what it was.”

“Right. I guess I wouldn’t tell them either, if I was her dad.”

I was beginning to understand just what my uncle’s aim in all of this was. He wanted Mashiro to have at least one ally within the class. Even better if that ally was a boy like me, who could step in to defend her. This way, the risk of her being singled out and bullied was much lower.

“That’s why, as your teacher, I want to ask you to look out for her, too. It would be nice if she could have at least some good memories of her school days.”

“I understand. I’ll look out for her.”

“Thank you. Sometimes it’s good that you like to stick your nose in other people’s business.”

“Sometimes it’s good when you decide to be quiet.”

“Don’t get me wrong; that was a compliment. Both Ozuma-kun and I have a lot to thank you for, you know.”

“I’m gonna head out. Otherwise I won’t have time for lunch.”

“One day maybe you’ll learn to take praise.”

Sumire let out a small giggle, which followed me all the way until I reached the door.

I really shouldn’t be so soft on her.

I looked over my shoulder, deciding to leave her with a parting gift to set things straight.

“Praise me all you like; it won’t get you any more extensions. Okay?”

Sumire responded with an ugly, dissatisfied grunt.

Looks like I saw right through her.

“She sure can be strict,” Ozu remarked over the phone, “but Sumire-sensei really does care about us students. Even if she’s a hardass in class, the stuff she says actually makes sense if you listen. She even understands when I go on about my programming stuff, you know? She’s definitely intelligent.”

“If you love her so much, why don’tcha marry her? Then you can do me a favor and get her to actually stick to the deadlines.”

“I don’t like her *that* much. And I think anybody’d have a hard time tryin’ to whip her into shape. Except you, maybe.”

“I’m a high schooler just like you, y’know? I don’t think I can do much about it either.”

“Sure, you’re just an ordinary high schooler!” Ozu let out a laugh.

“Quit laughin’ at me!”

Chapter 5: My Friend's Little Sister Has a Thing for Voyeurism

The bell rang out through the building, signaling the end of the school day.

Some students scrambled for the door, overjoyed to be free of school for another day. Some were rolling their shoulders, excited to head outdoors for their club activities. Some stared at the walls, having made the painstaking choice to stay behind and catch up on homework. And one certain little princess was sitting listlessly at the desk next to mine.

I decided to say something. I was sure that's what my uncle would want. Even though I knew she would shut me down with that sharp tongue of hers, at least I could say I tried.

"Hey—"

"You're not my real boyfriend."

I got a whole five words! Six if you count "you're" as two (and I gotta take what I can get here).

But wait. She said I wasn't her "real" boyfriend. Did that mean she accepted me as her *fake* boyfriend?

"Wow! I know you get tsunderes all the time in anime and stuff, but she's the first I've ever seen in real life!"

"Maybe she just doesn't like being all clingy in front of other people. Aah! It's so nice to see that traditional Japanese shyness in a girl these days!"

"They must be really close if she can act so cold towards him! More like a married couple than just boyfriend and girlfriend!"

Apparently, the students who were still trickling out of the classroom felt the need to make (completely inaccurate) comments. They needed their eyes tested, quite frankly. Anybody could see that Mashiro and I were a terrible match for each other. We could probably be at each other's throats (and I mean literally), and they would still smile and say how cute we were together.

Mashiro shrank back and began to fidget, her cheeks red. She must have noticed everyone too.

"U-Um, p-please... please stop staring..."

She scrambled to gather her things as fast as she could, and there was nothing I could do except watch as she scampered out of the classroom. The moment she was gone, I let out a sigh of relief.

I thought we'd get along better than this at least..

"She's not so bad," Ozu said, approaching me with a smile.

"Forget being her boyfriend, I need to make some progress in getting to be her actual friend first. Otherwise, how am I s'posed to look out for her?"

If only I was likeable, good-looking, and/or had the air of a protagonist about me... You know, like Ozu.

Although, if he ended up going after Mashiro, things might not end up so good either. If I got him to take over for me, and they actually fell in love, I think my uncle would explode. Not only would we lose out on our dream jobs, but I would be cut off and loathed by every last member of my extended family once the news got out.

"D'ya think there's any way I could get her to, y'know, at least be willing to *talk* to me?" I asked.

"Dunno... I mean, her opinion of you seems like it's not really gonna budge to me."

Easy for him to say. He's never met a girl who hates him in his life.

"I mean... I guess it's not such a big deal to me if she hates me," I said.

Maybe not a big deal, but a painful one. I could probably manage if I had to, but I didn't want to. And things would probably be easier on Mashiro if she lightened up a bit, too.

"Guess I'll worry about it later and just go home for now. Wanna come with me, Ozu?"

"Can't, sorry. The student council president wanted to see me."

"Oh, okay, Mr. Popular."

"It's not like that. She just wants me to do some chores for her. I'm way too wimpy for her to fall for me."

"You? Wimpy? In elementary school, sure, but now?"

"Well, whatever, all I'm sayin' is I can't go home with you today. Sorry, dude."

"It's cool. Catch you later."

He finally did it. He got on the elusive student council president's route.

"Sure. Can't wait to sort through those petitions she's got for me." And he was just as dense as ever about it.

I kept my sigh to myself as Ozu left the room with a quick wave in my direction. Guess I was heading home alone today. No biggie. I'd just stroll home while checking how our game was doing on the app store.

I had just changed back into my outdoor shoes by the shoe racks, when...

“Gah!”

“Guess who!”

Somebody slammed into me from behind. Why pretend I didn’t know who it was? There was only one person I knew who thought this sort of thing was socially acceptable.

“Oh, I know! It’s the girl whose voice I hate to hear: Iroha!” I exclaimed.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear most of that!” Her laugh rang through the air. And when I say “rang,” I mean like one of those horrendous church bells, not the little ones butlers use.

Her heat was almost overbearing as it clung to my back. Even though she wasn’t wearing perfume, there was a sweet scent around her that made my pulse rise instinctively. I cleared my throat in an attempt to stay calm.

“What d’you want?” I asked. “Also, let go.”

“You just looked so sad!” she said. “So I wanted to cheer up my super special awesome Senpai with a super special awesome hug!”

“I don’t need any super special awesome hugs. Let go.”

“Hmmm... Are you sure?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

I already knew she was up to something. Her lips curled, as though my puzzled response was just what she was waiting for.

“Can’t you feel them?” she whispered in my ear. “All soft and round and jiggly against your back?!”

“It’s just your boobs, right? I already... Wait...”

“Looks like you got it!”

Iroha instantly picked up on the slight stiffness in my expression. Her voice became even more sing-songy as she continued to tease me.

Was she for real right now?

Since I’d never been introduced to the (consensual) touch of a woman, all I had to go on were rumors.

I knew the ridiculously round sacks of flesh that you saw in anime weren’t realistic, and that in real life, the stiff bra would just get in the way if you just so happened to touch a clothed woman’s chest. The 3D world was often disappointing in this way.

What I meant was that covered boobs were rarely as soft as you’d expect (or hope, I daresay). The only exception was if the woman wasn’t wearing a bra. Or anything at all.

“Guess what, Senpai! I forgot to put on a bra today! Also, also! My blouse is totally unbuttoned!”

“B-Bullshit. I’m not as gullible as you think, y’know! Why the hell would you unbutton your blouse in the middle of school anyway?” I managed to choke out, my dry voice quivering.

With her pressing against my back like she was, I had no way to

turn around and verify her claims.

“My boobs got bigger, that’s why! And my blouse just gets soooo tight! I just stretched a little and aaaall the buttons came flying off! Whoopsie!”

“N-No they didn’t...”

“Yuh-huh! If you manage to get me off right now, you’ll see ’em, too!”

She sounded way too happy about this.

“This isn’t funny!” I said.

“I’m being serious!” She giggled. “Oooh, I don’t want anyone to see, so I gotta hold onto you nice and tight!”

“Your acting could use some work.”

This was all because she knew from my uncle’s phone call that I’d be in trouble if I had a girlfriend.

She still wasn’t letting go, and it was really starting to piss me off. Also, there was no way she was *actually* pressing her bare boobs against my back. Right? She was just kidding. I could shake her off no problem, and then only her lies would be bare for all to see.

Yup, she was definitely trying to fool me.

One hundred percent.

Unless...

Okay, so I wasn’t going to fall for the part where she said all her buttons sprang off. That was just ridiculous. But if her boobs really were out, and I pushed her away, what if some passing students saw them? Not that I *cared*, since it was her own fault, but... but she was my best friend’s sister. If she got caught up in some kind of scandal because of this, it’d affect him badly, too.

Apart from anything else, I wanted her to stop clinging to me. If somebody saw me with a half-naked girl on my back (who wasn’t my supposed girlfriend), I would have *a lot* of explaining to do. And if my uncle found out, I was toast. I had to do something about this situation as quickly as I could.

“Haha! I gotcha now! But don’t worry! I’ll still let ya go if you ask nicely!” she crooned.

“You asked for this.”

“Huh?”

“I’m doing this for both our sakes! And it’s not as hard as you might think!”

“H-Huh?! W-Wait, Wh— Eek!”

Leaning forward slightly, I slipped my arms behind her legs and held on tight. I then stood up, putting as much force into my legs as I could. Iroha was lifted up on my back as she continued to cling to my neck.

I was now giving her a tried-and-true piggyback.

“H-Hey, Senpai, whaddya doin’? P-Put me down!”

“It’s better than having your boobs out, right? Or was that just a lie?”

Iroha didn’t answer, but started to grumble in frustration. I could hear, rather than see, the disgruntled look on her face.

“A-Are you really sure you wanna do this? Anyone who sees us’ll think we’re a super icky couple.”

“I don’t care.”

The next moment, Iroha was shrieking as I pelted out of the entrance hall and made a dash for the closest clump of bushes. I marched on without even hesitating.

“Are you serious right now?! Quit being so normal about this!” Iroha snapped.

“I’m just taking the route where we’re least likely to get spotted. I don’t usually tell anyone about this route, so you should count yourself lucky.”

“Huh?! Since when did you know about this route?!”

“I’ve always known. Have you forgotten how I try to live as efficiently as I can?”

I’d tested out all the routes I could find to get home, all in the name of efficiency. Familiarizing myself with all the routes I could take was just basic common sense. Every single way I could get from home to school, and even all the way to the classroom, was imprinted in my brain.

The route we were taking now was the least busy in the after-school rush, and the one where we were least likely to be spotted.

“Y’know, you might be even weirder than I thought,” Iroha said.

“Nah, I’m pretty normal.”

“Shut up. Normal people don’t map out every route back—gaahaaah!”

“Quit yelling, dumbass! People might see us. Just hold on tight and don’t fall off.”

Thanks to a well-timed burst of speed on my part, Iroha wasn’t able to finish her insult.

I had to admit, she was lighter than I expected, given how all she ever seemed to do was eat, sleep, and laze around. But despite that, she was still in pretty good shape. Maybe it was all to do with the lack of mass occupying her skull. Now *that* would make for an interesting science experiment.

“Huh? Did you say something?”

It sounded like Iroha was trying to talk, but I couldn’t for the life of me work out what she was saying, probably because I was busy running as fast as I could to avoid being seen. It felt like I was outrunning the wind at this point.



"I-I said I give in! Y-You can put me down now!" Iroha cried.

Finally, I understood what she said. We were in a narrow lane behind the school, and I was slowing down to turn a corner. Iroha had let go of my neck and was now whining and hammering her fists on my back. I looked over my shoulder at her.

"Isn't there something you want to say to me first?" I asked.

"...I-I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"I-I'm sorry for pretending all my buttons flew off and that my blouse was open..."

"And?"

"A-And I'm sorry for trying to annoy you."

"Good girl."

Satisfied, I let go of her without a second thought. Iroha immediately slid to the ground, landing on her rear.

"H-Hey!"

"Feel that pain in your ass? That's what it's like having to deal with you almost every single day."

"Is that how your mom taught you to treat a lady?! No wonder girls don't like you!"

"Oh, cry me a river."

Iroha was scowling at me while rubbing her sore behind. Surprise, surprise, her blouse was perfectly buttoned-up. Though I wasn't about to get a view of her boobs, thanks to the entire ordeal, her skirt was rolled up and exposing her thick thighs. I quickly looked away.

Sometimes I wished her personality would match her nice body. At least then I wouldn't have to feel gross admitting that she was pretty attractive.

"Ugh! I can't believe I was carried around at this age! You're lucky no one saw us!"

"Oh, so you do have some shame! News to me."

Her scowling face was still red with embarrassment. She must have been even more humiliated than she was trying to let on.

"Y'know, usually I'd expect you to make some crude remark about how you enjoyed being so close to me or something..."

"I-I'd never..."

"But it turns out treating you like a kid was quite effective. Now, come give Daddy a nice big—"

"Quit it! Do you want me to cry?!"

"Aww, you always were such a widdle cwy-baby!"

"Quit it!" Iroha shrieked, her voice piercing my ears.

She squirmed and writhed on the ground in agony, holding her head. I was on to something good here.

“Our mom still treated us like kids, right up until we started high school... and now you’re giving me super gross flashbacks!” Iroha explained.

“Well, now you’re just making me feel bad. I’ll have to be responsible with this newfound knowledge...”

“Y-You’ll regret this! I lost this time, but I’ll get my revenge!”

“Sure, try your luck whenever you want. Outsmarting you isn’t gonna take much.”

I had no idea why she’d decided we were suddenly in some sort of competition, but whatever. Iroha finally got to her feet, grumbling all the while.

“I can’t believe I lost, after I went through all that trouble of not wearing a bra.”

“Huh? But the whole thing was a big joke, right? So what did you just say?”

“I said ‘I lost.’”

“No, I mean after that.”

“‘Went through all that trouble?’”

“C’mon, now...” I cut myself off. “Whatever. I know what I heard. I just wanted to pretend I hadn’t.”

I spun around, not able to bear the confused look in Iroha’s eyes any longer. Why was I getting so flustered *now*, after all that just happened?

So she really... wasn’t wearing a bra?

It made sense. Her boobs felt soft enough, after all. Had she really gone that far?

Yeah, I know she was wearing a blouse, but... she still pressed her breasts against me, didn’t she?

Maybe I underestimated what this girl was really capable of.

I’ll say it again. She came to school, and spent the whole day without a bra on, just to try and wind me up by pressing her boobs against my back.

But that made no sense at all! Unless...

Maybe... Just maybe...

She hated me way more than I thought!

After all, who else would she spring a literal booby trap on? She hated me so much, she was willing to use every last one of her womanly assets in a campaign against me. Just what did I do to deserve this?! It was funny, too, because if it wasn’t so obviously out of malice, you could mistake it for a sign of affection.

“Iroha... You’re really something, you know that?”

“Huh?”

As Iroha blinked at me in confusion, I felt myself rising to a new stage of enlightenment.

With Iroha no longer on my back, I could stop worrying about the stares of other people as we made our way home. I strolled along the sidewalk while Iroha trod carefully along the curb, her arms stretched out for balance.

“Hey, could you do me a favor?” I asked.

“Sure, whatever you want, virgin.”

“Oh? Would you wike me to talk wike dis again?”

“No! No, please! I was just kidding!”

I knew it. This weapon in my possession was all-powerful.

Though Iroha pouted at first, she seemed to realize that I was going to ask her something serious. Her expression stiffened. “What’s this favor?”

“There’s no one as ridiculously annoying as you, and so I decided you’re the perfect person to ask...”

“Okay, rude.”

“...I wondered if you had any idea how to become friends with a girl who’s a complete pain in the ass.”

There was a pause.

“Huh?” Iroha froze, as though she didn’t understand the question.

“H-Huh? Did you... Do you have a crush on someone, Senpai?”

Her voice trembled, like the President of the USA when he learned the Earth was under attack by aliens (I’m talking about the movies, of course). Her face even drained of its color.

Why was she looking at me like that? Even if I did have a crush on someone, was that such a bad thing?

“No, that’s not it...”

I began to explain how I was doing all sorts of things behind the scenes for the future of the 05th Floor Alliance. I told her about the mission I received from Tsukinomori-san, and how I now had to pretend I was Mashiro’s boyfriend. I included the fact that Sumire-sensei had been asked to keep an eye on her, since she had a lot going on before she transferred. I told her how I wanted to at least become Mashiro’s friend if I could, which would have the added effect of helping her have a fun and fulfilling school life.

It was only when I was explaining it that I realized how ridiculous the whole thing was. At first, Iroha was perplexed, but she soon had the gist of my predicament.

“Gosh, Senpai, you really like to stick your nose in other people’s business, huh?”

“Only for my own sake, mind you. I’m not doing this for anyone else.”

“Her name’s Mashiro-san, right? It’s not like you actually *need* to be her friend though, is it?”

“I guess not, but I’d feel kinda bad if she ended up lonely. I guess you’d call it a savior complex.”

“Yeah, that’s what we call bein’ nosy! ’Snot a bad thing, though.” Iroha giggled, as though amused by some unearthed memory.

“Whatever it is, I just dunno where to start. She just straight up cuts me off whenever I try to talk to her.”

“I mean, yeah, you did walk in on her using the bathroom the first time you met. So I’m not surprised.”

“I know, and I feel bad for it.”

“Duh. I’d be worried if you didn’t,” Iroha said, though she didn’t seem to hold it against me.

That was another part of her personality (you know, aside from “super annoying bitch”). No matter what you did, she would never really dig too deep or criticize you for it. When I told her about my bathroom blunder, she just laughed it off. Dare I say it, this was a side of her that I might actually like. She was easy to talk to and have fun with, and I might have done it more often if she weren’t so annoying. I guess I couldn’t have my cake and eat it.

“So you’ve got yourself a closed-off tsundere with a sharp tongue. I know the type from H-games.” Iroha nodded sagely.

“No you don’t. Or you shouldn’t. You’re not eighteen yet.”

“C’mon, lighten up. H-games are popular with all ages these days! Not all of them are eighteen-plus anymore, you know!”

“Sounds like fake news to me.”

“It’s not! It’s called cultural advancement!” She grinned. “Anyway, just leave it to me!”

Iroha placed a fist to her unsupported chest, which jiggled slightly. “Don’t worry, Senpai! I’ll teach you all you need to know to crack this pretty little nut!”

“So her boobs touched you? Do I have to go beat you up?”

“W-Wait, you don’t get it, Ozu. *I* didn’t do anything!”

“Right, but I don’t care if you did. She can do what she wants, y’know? I’m not the kinda guy who’s obsessed with his sister.”

“Then how come I can feel your bloodlust through the phone?!”

“Oh, it’s just that you’re braggin’ to me right now about some girl havin’ her boobs on your back. I think any dude would wanna punch you in the face.”

“Y’know, I’m kinda glad I’m not sitting next to you right now...”

Chapter 6: I Have It In for My Uncle's Daughter!

The next day, I began my new life as Mashiro's slave.

In the morning, I waited for her at the school gates. Once I saw her, I immediately slid in to carry her bag for her, wagging my (imaginary) tail all the while. I wouldn't want her delicate hands to be destroyed by the weight of the extra baggage, and I wanted to make things as easy as possible for her. Mashiro was so grateful for my help that she was at an utter loss for words all the way to the classroom.

At lunchtime, I ran to the school store to get her three tuna-and-onion rice balls, and some special tea to pour over one of them if she wanted. I had done my research, and knew that these were some of Mashiro's favorites.

Mashiro was so choked up with joy, that she couldn't bear to eat or drink any of it.

After school I rushed to Mashiro's desk and knelt down in front of her, offering her my back to carry her home. There was no way I could let her feet touch the dirty ground!

Again, stoic as she was, Mashiro was so moved by my wonderful display of devotion, that she could not utter a word. In fact, she hadn't said anything all day. Instead, she stood there, trembling.

"C... Come... Come with me!"

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

Mashiro grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and dragged me out into the hallway. She led me all the way down to a storage room by the stairs, somewhere which saw very little traffic, before practically pinning me up against the wall.

"Why are you being so unbearably annoying today?!" She kept her voice low, but rage rumbled quietly through every syllable.

"Haha, yeah, I guess it is kinda annoying..."

"You 'guess'?! I've never known somebody to be so... so unbearable like you were today!"

"I gotta be honest, I was kinda doubting myself the whole time like: 'Damn, maybe I'm going a bit too far'..."

"Oh my God!"

"But you're being kinda mean to me right now, y'know? Would you kindly listen to what I wanna say?"

My slavish devotion was not without cause. Everything: carrying her bag, buying her lunch, offering to take her home... All of it was Iroha's idea. It was all part of a plan to get closer to the icy girl that was Tsukinomori Mashiro.

I knew from the outset that it would be super annoying, but if I didn't go all out, it would just damage the chances of the plan working. I couldn't afford to fail here.

Although around halfway through the day, I realized it was probably a bust. I realized I was toeing the line between lovable slave and crazy, obsessed stalker. I guess even the slave part was kinda weird.

At the end of the day, I was just lucky that no matter what sort of near-criminal acts I committed in her vicinity, the class just thought it was an act of deep and passionate love. My reputation was as tough as titanium at this point. In fact, maybe they were under some sort of hypnosis. Or maybe this was a Truman Show-type deal and they just had to pretend everything was nice and normal.

Anyway, I gave Mashiro a full rundown of the situation. As I explained, the anger in her eyes softened just a tiny bit, and I could even swear I saw a smattering of sympathy in them.

"Are you stupid or something?" she asked.

"I might just be."

After all, I did decide that Iroha was the best person to help me. I could still remember that stupid smirk on her face as she told me about the plan.

"Listen up, Senpai! The first way to get in a girl's good books is to be nice to her!"

"That's it?"

"Abso-posi-lutely! Girls are super easy to understand! You just gotta sprinkle on the charm, and then they'll be up all night thinkin' about you! Definitely! Maybe!"

"You have no clue what you're talking about, do you?!"

"Snot my fault! I'm still a super pure, inexperienced virgin, after all! But anyway, just do what I say, and it might work out!"

"Could you give me some specific odds on that?"

"Look, if you think I'm kidding, just try it out and then you'll know for sure! Tee-hee!"

Turns out she was spewing shit the whole time.

I followed Iroha's plan down to a T. And now look what happened. Iroha must've been a special kind of genius to be able to make other people act as unbearable as her. It was almost impressive. *Almost.*

“Floor. Kneel. Now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The cold, hard floor froze my legs as the cold draft from the stairwell chilled my body and Mashiro’s cold gaze numbed me from above. There were a handful of highly-advanced beings in my class who would see this as a reward of sorts. I, in my lowly existence, saw it as nothing but pain.

“You knew you were being annoying, but you kept going. Do you really hate me that much?” Mashiro asked.

“Nah, it’s more like... Well...”

“What?”

I could see Mashiro’s frown deepen as I fumbled my words.

How the hell am I s’posed to explain?

I didn’t exactly want to blame Iroha for all of this. Sure, her plan was the most annoying idea man had ever concocted, but I was the one who chose to go ahead with it. *I* was the one who pestered Mashiro today, and I wasn’t about to make excuses for it. I wasn’t about to mention Iroha here.

But leaving her out of it left me with practically no explanation. So what was I—

“Aww! Look at the cute widdle couple! Are ya makin’ out? Huh? Are ya?!”

There it was. That shrill, annoying voice echoing out from the stairs above us. I looked up to see the golden-haired girl leaning over the handrail, her mouth puckered, and her boobs dangling over the side.

“Come to heckle me, Iroha?” I asked.

“Course not! I just came to see how amazingly my super genius plan went!”

“It went amazingly crappily, you dumb bitch.”

“She’s even got you kneeling on the ground!” Iroha guffawed.

“Must be karma for beating me the other day!”

Quit laughin’!

She was in for a world of pain... as soon as I was allowed off the floor.

“Who is that?” Mashiro narrowed her eyes at Iroha suspiciously, a sensible reaction if I ever saw one.

“Hiya! I’m the one who set up this whole shtick for you, Mashiro-senpai!”

“Dude, shut up!” I snapped.

“What? It’s true!”

Maybe, but you still shouldn’t say it.

There goes my whole “keeping Iroha out of this” tactic...

“Stop talking amongst yourselves! It’s annoying, and... huh?”

Mashiro stared up at Iroha, as though she'd noticed something. Her voice empty of emotion, she continued, "Oh, I see... Now I get it."

Huh? What? She was suddenly even madder than before, but I had no clue why. Before I even had time to guess, she turned on her heel with a squeak of her shoes.

"I'm going home," she announced.

"H-Hey, wait! What's the matter?"

"Isn't she the cute kouhai you get along so well with?"

"Well, she's a kouhai, but she isn't cute, and no, we don't get along. In fact, I'm pretty sure she has it in for me."

"So she's flirting with you?"

"Wh-Wha...?!"

"You've been making fun of me together this whole time! You two can go to hell!" Mashiro spat, before leaving us behind.

I watched her leave, gobsmacked. The aura coming off her was a hundred times colder than anything I'd felt so far. Guess global warming was fixed.

"Oopsie!" Iroha, who had slid down the handrail to stand next to me, said. "Welp, guess she really hates you now, huh?"

"Yeah! And that's entirely your fault!"

"Nuh-uh! It's like, eighty percent yours!"

"Whatever dumb math equation you're using is way off!"

Secretly, though, I thought that was pretty accurate. All Iroha really did was give me the idea. I was the one who went to her for help, I was the one who carried it out, and I was the one who fumbled my explanation to Mashiro. I had no one to blame but myself for how much she hated me now.

"So how're ya gonna get outta this one, Senpai?"

"I dunno. But I'll have to think of something..." I sighed. I couldn't leave things as they were, but I also had no idea how to fix them. "I won't be seeing her until tomorrow, anyway. So I'll think of something to say to her tonight."

"Now for the widescreen TV! Come on, put your backs into it! But be careful!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

As with all my decisions in life, I chose my current apartment building based entirely on efficiency. During junior high school, my parents were transferred abroad, but left me with enough of a budget that I didn't need to worry about money. I spent a lot of time looking into the apartments that were within walking distance to my new high school.

I decided to live on the fifth and highest floor of the apartment

building, since it was the safest and least vulnerable to crime. And so, I ended up in Room 502. Room 501 was the corner room. I didn't choose that one, because it was so close to the neighboring building, that crime and privacy would become more of an issue. In the three years I've been living here, nobody had ever moved in there, so I guess I wasn't the only one who came to those conclusions.

I'm glad I chose to live here. I met the Kohinata family who lived next door in Room 503, and Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, AKA Sumire-sensei, was in Room 504. It was a happy little coincidence that most of the 05th Floor Alliance ended up on the same floor like this.

We were so happy in our cozy little paradise, that we'd forgotten there was still an unoccupied room.

"Now, the bookcase! If you guys are so smart, you should be used to lifting those!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

An unoccupied room which could become occupied at any moment.

That was fine, but why did it have to be like this?

When I came home from school, I was greeted by the cheerful voices of brawny movers as they transported furniture from the truck into the apartment building. It was only when I reached the fifth floor that I came across the same girl who sat next to me at school.

We stared at each other in silence.

I had no idea what I was supposed to do or say, so my brain decided to do the stupid thing and say exactly what I was thinking out loud.

"No way... You gotta be kiddin' me!"

"Ooh, what a coinkydink! Hiya there!" Iroha, who walked home with me, stuck her head out from behind me. I could hear the grin on her face from her greeting.

Why on earth wasn't she freaking out? There was no way this was happening! And yet there she was, *the* Tsukinomori Mashiro, the same girl who was scowling for hours next to me in school, anxiously watching the movers carry her things into Room 501!

The glare she was giving me now was immense.

"Are you stalking me or something?!"

"Uh, no. I live here."

"Stop lying!"

"I live here too!" Iroha added helpfully.

"Huh?!" Mashiro's eyebrow twitched as Iroha hopped out in front of her. "Question. Who exactly are you to Aki?"

"I'm his little sister!"

"Aki has a sister?"

"I'm his friend's sister, which makes me his real sister. I wish

people would understand that!"

"Are you stupid or something?"

"Oh, ouch. Your burns are just as sick as Senpai's! Oh, teach me your ways, Mashiro-sama! What's the secret? Eat a lotta spicy foods?"

"H-Has anybody ever told you you're incredibly annoying?"

Mashiro asked, as though genuinely concerned.

Iroha continued to pummel on Mashiro's shoulders playfully, not deterred in the least. Now that I wasn't the target, I had a renewed appreciation for just how unbearable her behavior really was.

It must be her dreaded extrovertism. How else could she justify treating someone she only just met like this?

"Quit it, Iroha. Why are you bein' such a pain to her? I thought you could act normal when you wanted to."

"I'm good at pickin' time and place, that's why! And this is how I'm gonna act with Mashiro-san. 'Specially 'cause it pisses you off!"

She had a one-track mind. Too bad the track was twisted and in desperate need of repair.

I ignored her grin and the accompanying inappropriate thumbs-up, and instead decided to be the decent one here and apologize to Mashiro.

"I'm sorry my kouhai's such a pain."

"That's her problem, not yours," Mashiro muttered, turning her disgruntled face away from me. Glancing back at me, she added, "She's your friend's sister, right? In other words, unrelated. In other words, you're living with a girl who isn't a relative. In other words..."

"N-No, it's nothing like that."

The way we acted together was a result of living in such close quarters for such a long period of time. I forgot just how that might look to an outsider. Plus, we did just come home together from school, which normally would mean we were planning to hang out in the same apartment. *And* we were of the opposite gender. That we were somehow involved was the most logical conclusion for Mashiro to jump to.

"We don't live together," I said. "I'm in Room 502, and—"

"I'm in Room 503!"

"What?" Mashiro blinked.

"Ozu lives here too. Y'know, Kohinata Ozuma, the guy in our class I'm always talkin' to? He's this kid's brother."

"Who're you callin' kid?! How rude! C'mon, you can say my name like you always do! 'Iroha, my sweet little Iroha!'"

"Wh-What?" Mashiro blinked in utter confusion.

Iroha was laughing now, but I wasn't sure why.

Mashiro dodged past us and scampered up to check the name plates outside our apartments.

“Ooboshi?... ‘Kohinata’... Y-You guys weren’t lying!”

“By the way, the next room over, 504, is where our teacher Kageishi Sumire-sensei lives.”

“Wh-Why do you all live here?” Mashiro asked.

“It’s just a huge coincidence.”

“Really...” She narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

I couldn’t blame her. I’d react the same way if it turned out I already knew everyone on the same floor of my new apartment.

“Hm?” Her face suddenly darkening, Mashiro muttered something inaudible under her breath. “5th floor... 05th Floor... Alliance? It can’t be...”

“Did you say something?”

Mashiro didn’t answer me, instead sinking into a thoughtful silence, as though on the brink of a huge scientific breakthrough of some kind. The pale skin on the back of her neck was tinged pink, but I couldn’t tell if she was mad or if it was something else. After muttering to herself for a while, she spun round and thrust her finger out at both of us.

“Both of you are annoying. And you bring that with you wherever you go!” She turned her back on us. “Don’t act all buddy-buddy with me, just because we’re neighbors now.”

“This is getting a bit old now, y’know? Why not just be friends? That would be way... Gah!”

“The refrigerator! Come on, lift with your legs!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Just as I was about to stop Mashiro from retreating into her castle, I was blocked off by a wall of buff men. They marched in front of me in a row, leaving me with only a glimpse of Mashiro’s back as she disappeared into Room 501.

“Dammit. Talk about bad timing...”

“Aaaah! The JPS men are so hot! Did you know that 90% of them are big on bodybuilding, and that there are all kinds of popular doujinshi about them? I looked it up!”

“Don’t care.”

“You’re pretty muscly too, even though you look like a soyboy with your clothes on. Guess I’ll be seeing you in some doujinshi too sometime!”

“You haven’t seen me with my clothes off.”

“Have too! Since you always wear just your boxers when you come outta the bath! Even if I run away the moment we make eye contact, I already took a proper screenshot with my brain! Those screenshots are how I know *all* your secrets!”

“Do you think if I smash your head in, it’ll corrupt your data?”

“No, but it might be kinda hot!”

“Oh my God, stop it. Also, quit coming into my room when I’m in the bath. I didn’t know that was you.”

Yes, I did call the police when I heard someone calling out to me as I was whistling and washing my hair. I told them it was a cat, though (because I *thought* it was a cat).

“Oh, come on! You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of! The definition on your abs is pretty good, y’know!”

“It’s not much, and it’s to be expected, since I work out every day. I’m still a stick compared to a pro wrestler or a rugby player.”

“Duh, if you’re gonna compare yourself to people like that, ’course you look bad!”

Daily work-outs were a habit by now. I wanted to waste as little of my life dealing with injury and illness as possible. To optimize my physical resource use, I looked into every way you could keep yourself healthy.

Turns out routine and moderate exercise are the best ways to do that, believe it or not. Ever since then, I started daily muscle training. I wasn’t taking supplements, making goals, or going to the gym or anything, but my daily exercise meant that my body was just a bit more muscular than average.

“Anyway, that’s not important right now. What’s important, is—”

“That Mashiro-san ran away from you?”

“No, I don’t mind that. I was expecting that the moment we ran into her here, actually.”

I paused, before breaking into a grin. Iroha’s eyes widened.

“Hey, I don’t think you’ve been this pumped up for ages!”

“Not since I had Murasaki Shikibu-sensei sniveling at my feet,” I agreed. “You shoulda seen the look on her face...”

“I-I didn’t know you were such a sadist!”

“Say whatever you want. But Mashiro’s not getting away from me, either.” I cracked my knuckles, my grin widening.

There was only so much I could do when my interactions with Mashiro were confined to the classroom. Even if both our teacher and my uncle badgered me to keep my eye on her, and act as her boyfriend, I still couldn’t do anything if Mashiro kept pushing me away.

But she was on my turf now, like a fly caught in my web. And that wasn’t on me. That was on her making the mistake of moving into the same building. Let her call me annoying, or a hypocrite. I didn’t care.

“I’ll show her just how nosy I can be!”

“All right, now it’s finally time for the bed! It’s not gonna fit in the elevator, so shove it through the window!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

I cackled to myself silently among the movers’ grunts and shouts.

Princess Mashiro had finally emerged from her castle, and was now living with a group of happy little dwarves. And these dwarves were just what Snow White needed right now.

I wasn't worried that I was going too far, nor was I prepared to take Mashiro's cold front into consideration. There was no way she *wanted* to be alone.

There was no way that she wanted to go back to her old life, where she had nothing but lonely memories of being bullied. She had left her old house, which wasn't even that far from our school, to move in here.

Why would she have gone through all that trouble if she didn't want a fresh start? I was sure that, in her own way, she wanted to be able to live a fun and happy life for her remaining school years.

There was only one thing for me to do now. It was the most efficient and effective thing I could do, to fulfill that wish of hers.

"So my fake girlfriend is now living next door to me, basically," I explained to Ozu over the phone.

"Your harem nest is gettin' more packed by the day, huh? Welp, 'slong as I get to sit back and watch the drama unfold..."

Chapter 7: Iroha, Ozu, Sumire, and I All Have It In for Mashiro

“Everybody ready? To the release of the new characters and routes!”

“To the release!” we roared as the sound of clinking glasses filled the air.

It was Friday night. There were four of us, male and female, celebrating in the living room of my three-bedroom apartment.

The six-person round table I bought for just this sort of occasion was laden with food and drinks. Homemade roast beef, the pizza we ordered, a pricey Shimane sake, twenty-year-old whiskey, and bottles of cola and oolong tea. It was a feast fit for a king.

There was even a cake in the fridge made by a top patissier at a bakery run by one of Sumire-sensei’s friends. That patissier had studied in France.

We held a party like this every single week. This was our “Somehow, We Survived This Exhausting Week, So Let’s Use The Opportunity To Reset And Get Ready To Survive Another One” party. Yes, that was this event’s official name.

Sumire swallowed down her luxurious concoction of cola and whiskey before letting out a satisfied sigh.

“This stuff sure tastes better once your deadlines are over!”

“I seriously thought you weren’t gonna make it this time,” I sighed.

Those bags under her eyes were the result of her staying up all night just to get those darned illustrations finished. Side note: I was only really mean to her when she was lagging behind. At times like this, I had to remember that she was my teacher.

“You stink of alcohol!” Iroha giggled at her. “How many did you have before you came here?”

“Why would I remember somethin’ like that? I mean, d’you remember how much you’ve had in your life, Iroha-chan?”

“Drinking’s a big no-no for me, remember?! I’m not old like you!”

“I’m not old, either! Not even thirty, I’ll have you know!”

“Okie-dokie, if you say so! If you really were that old, I wouldn’t tease you ’bout it though, ’kay? So when I stop is when you should get scared! Anyway, would you like somethin’ else to drink?”

“Vodka on the rocks!” Sumire handed her empty glass to Iroha,

who began to fill it up neatly.

Seeing how polite she could be with her elders, it was even more obvious how impolitely she behaved towards me.

“This beef’s good! Did you make this, Aki?” Ozu asked.

“Yeah, I found a lifehack online on how to prepare one with a rice cooker.”

“You’re good around the house, huh? Y’know, this is even better than what you’d get in a restaurant.”

“C’mon, quit actin’ like you know anything about cooking. Think of those poor souls who work for years, only for you to say that my hack job is better.”

Ozu and I munched on the food as we watched Iroha and Sumire chatting. I couldn’t believe he was impressed by the cheap cut of beef I picked up at the store. He really was good at praising you for the smallest of things.

“Sgood, though. Makes me jealous of Iroha, too. Once you two get married, she’ll get to eat like this every day!”

“You can keep her. I’d probably die of stress by thirty if I had to live with her.”

“Shame. I was hoping to set her up with someone with a billion talents like you. Take away my worries, y’know.”

“I’ve already said that I’m really not as impressive as you. Any other programmer would’ve struggled to get the release ready in time.”

“Especially with the art coming in right at the last minute. Luckily I got that program set up so that Kageishi-sensei’s computer sends over the art the moment the coloring’s done. By the time I’m putting it into the game, she’s already fast asleep from exhaustion.”

“I’m sorry, how exactly does that program work?”

“Oh, y’know. I just thought it’d be useful, so I bungled something together.”

“I guess I shouldn’t’ve asked...”

There were some things that were just beyond the scope of understanding for us mere mortals.

Ozu could read and write his programming languages as though he was born speaking it. He had always been incredibly good at numbers and calculations, though. He was our elementary school’s top athlete in the Mathematical Olympiad, and the mathematician who gave a running commentary on the whole event told me that Ozu was easily in the world’s top ten.

“Honestly, my skills aren’t that impressive,” Ozu continued.

“Don’t be so modest. I don’t know anyone who comes close to your level of programming.”

“Sure, but it doesn’t matter what skills you have if you don’t know

how to use them properly. You were the one who set me on this path, and you're the reason I'm having such a good time right now, *and* the reason I'm drinking this ginger ale here, which is pretty decent. That's why you're more impressive to me."

"Don't start diggin' up the past now..."

"You're just embarrassed, ain'tcha?" Ozu laughed, gulping down the rest of his slightly-better-than-average ginger ale.

I didn't want to think too hard about Ozu's past, and I certainly didn't want to dig into it now, of all times. It was simply the tale of a big fish being confined to the small pond that was our national education system, and suffering because of it.

"By the way, where's Makigai-sensei?" Ozu asked suddenly.

I quickly opened up my phone, found Makigai Namako's account with its chibi sea cucumber profile picture (incidentally, 'Namako' also meant 'Sea Cucumber'), and showed Ozu the messages.

"He's got some novel deadline coming up, so said he couldn't make it."

I was 05th Floor Alliance's director. Ozu was the programmer and Sumire was the artist, but there was also one more member who played a huge role in the development of our game. Someone so influential, that it was nothing short of a miracle that he decided to join our team when no one had even heard of us, and we didn't have the advertising budget to change that.

Makigai Namako.

A light novel author whose work won first prize in a UZA Bunko competition three years ago. That work then went on to become a series which sold over three million copies, launching Makigai's career with a spectacular debut.

There was something about the sarcastic wit in his writing, and his strangely specific knowledge about sea creatures. What impressed most people was his engrossing and innovative style, as well as how he developed his main characters. Even though his series was wildly popular, he still refused again and again to have it adapted into a manga or anime series.

Somehow we managed to get the contact details for this modern-day Shakespeare, and could now converse with this mysterious author online. I was also a fan of his, having become completely hooked on his unique characters and stories.

I squeezed in my contact details and the request for him to write our scenarios in the corner of some fan mail I sent, figuring it couldn't hurt. I did what I could to make it inconspicuous so that his editors wouldn't stop it, and then, by some miracle, I got a response.

Now he was in the 05th Floor Alliance group chat, and we spoke with him as casually as anybody else. Though I'd never met him,

judging by his voice on call he sounded like a friendly guy in his twenties.

“He’s never used a deadline as an excuse to miss out on a party,” Ozu commented.

“Hey, you’re right. He’s always typing up a storm whenever he joins us.”

This was probably a good time to mention that he joined these parties virtually, via voice chat.

“Maybe it’s just an excuse. D’you reckon his girlfriend’s over or somethin’?”

“I feel like he’d prioritize the party over her... But whatever. Guess the ways of adults are incomprehensible to us kids.”

“You guys talkin’ shit about me?!” Sumire slurred. “Want me t’have a meltdown right here, right now?!”

She must’ve tuned in when she heard the word “adult.” Not that I personally thought she had any right using that word to describe herself.

“No, we’re talking about Makigai-sensei. H-Hey, stay away from me! We’ve been here like, two seconds! How much have you had?!”

“I’m having an awesome time right now! C’mon, Akiteru-sama, it’s time for you to take care of me now! I feel all flushed...”

“Y’know if I reported this you’d get fired, right? H-Hey, quit it! Iroha! What the hell did you give her?!”

“Nothin’,” Iroha replied with a shrug. “She just swiped the bottle off me. Probably had somethin’ like ten shots of vodka.”

“You gotta be kiddin’ me. You could drink Rasputin under the table with that!”

“Chill! She watered down the second half with this stuff.” Iroha shook a bottle of clear liquid out in front of me.

Well, if she watered it down, I guess that’s... That’s not water, is it?

“Isn’t that sake?!”

“Waah, everything’s twirling around me! Akiteru-sama, you look like a young boy! A beautiful shota...”

“Please, keep your hallucinations to yourself.”

“Aaah! A tsundere shota! I can’t take it!” Sumire began to push her flushed face against my body like an intoxicated cat.

You may wonder why a teenage boy like myself wasn’t the least bit pleased about his hot teacher nuzzling so seductively against him. The answer was simple. The stink of the alcohol covered up any whiff of pheromones I might have gotten.

It was common to hear stories of men taking advantage of women in a state like this, but I never understood that. Who’d wanna lay a finger on someone who’s completely wasted?

Sure, her skin was soft, and so was her chest, but apart from that,

I wasn't feeling it at all.

"Aah, you're so cute! But there's somethin' missin', y'know? Oooh! Look! There's another shota over there!"

"M-Me?" Ozu stared at her blankly. No surprise. I'd never heard of a shota who attended public high school, either.

"Yeah! You have light hair, and you're so gentle! Just like a little prince! C'mere..."

"Uh... okay, I guess."

"No, Ozu! Stay back! You'll—"

Sumire-sensei tugged on Ozu's arm, and I found my face buried in his chest.

"Yes, perfect! Now we have the super cold shota, Akiteru-sama, comforted by the princely Ozuma-kun!"

There was the sound of clicking and heavy breathing as Sumire shuffled back and took photos of the jumbled mess that was our two bodies squished together.

"Ozuaki!" Iroha cried in joy. "Damn, you sure know how to pick a good ship, Sumire-chan-sensei!"

"Sgood, right? I can't take it! Aaah! I need another drink!"

The girls giggled with each other.

This was why Sumire wasn't a fun drunk to be around. This wasn't the first time she claimed we were "shotas." It wasn't the first time she had managed to get me and Ozu into an outrageous pose for her delusional enjoyment, either.

We told her again and again that there was nothing between us and that it was annoying beyond belief, but the moment she had some alcohol in her system, her ship set sail once more. The drink stripped away the thin paint of her exterior to show her true colors. In her heart, she shipped us hardcore, and would like it even better if we were kids.

I guess everyone was entitled to their own fantasies. But when your teacher was getting turned on by you with another classmate, it was more than a little concerning.

"Sorry, Ozu. They're always like this." I sat up straight again, shuffling away from Ozu.

"I-I know. Don't worry about it."

"Nothin' fazes you, huh? You're allowed to get mad, y'know."

"I get that, but I don't think she means anythin' by it, really." Ozu shrugged, his cheeks slightly reddened. By the lighting in the room, of course.

"What the hell?! Get back on top of him! Gimme some more of that prepubescent yaoi! *C'mon!*"

"How about you snap back to reality before the police snap some cuffs on you, huh?"

Sumire squealed like a strangled frog and fell to the floor as I gave her a chop to the neck for good measure. She got up almost immediately, looking around the room in confusion.

“Wh-Where am I?”

“In the middle of committing grievous sexual harassment against your students.”

“What? My 3D students? Ew, no way,” she said sleepily.

“Wish I could blank out my memory as easily as you.” I didn’t want to bother with her any further, and cleared my throat loudly.

“Okay, guys, I have an announcement to make. A serious one,” I said.

The room fell into silence, the party atmosphere swept away by a cold tension. Even Iroha shut up. She could be serious when she wanted to, just like the other members here. Working hard and playing hard was part of 05th Floor Alliance’s motto. I swept my gaze over the faces in the room and began.

“I wanted to talk about the new resident, Tsukinomori Mashiro.”

I launched straight into an explanation of everything that had happened up until now. About the deal I had with her dad, the whole fake-boyfriend thing, how she hated me, and how she now lived in the apartment next door and was likely looking for a fresh start.

More than anything, I explained how she didn’t seem to be having fun at school, and how I wanted to fix that.

“I want her to join our group. Maybe I’m meddling, and maybe she doesn’t even want to, but I just know there’s a reason her dad asked me to look out for her, and I think this might be it, so... Will you guys help me?”

Silence. Nobody was looking at me. Instead, they had their heads down, as though deep in thought. The wall clock ticked by, made louder by the silence. One, two, three, four, five...

“Pfft!” I don’t think I need to tell you, but that was Iroha.

“Y’know, you’re always sayin’ how you only care about efficiency and yourself and stuff, but you still look out for other people like this!”

“Yeah, it’s just like you to come up with somethin’ like this,” Ozu agreed. “Kind, but firm. It’s hard to keep up with sometimes, actually. I guess you’re proof that even tin men can have a heart sometimes.”

“I like it. Mashiro-chan needs somewhere she can be herself. I’m sure that’s what she wants, too,” Sumire said.

“So, what’s the plan, Senpai?”

“I wanna throw her a welcome party.”

“Like this one?” asked Ozu.

“Yup. We’ll invite her to one of these, and corrupt her with our cringey conversations.”

“D’you think she’ll come, though?” Iroha said.

“No, which is why I have a plan. And I need your help with it.”

“Ooh, that sounds super fun! Let’s do it! Give us the briefing, boss! The deets! The down-low!”

“Now listen closely...”

The walls were thick enough that we weren’t at risk of being overheard, but I lowered my voice just in case, explaining the plan to them. I knew it was a nonsense plan, and it had no chance of succeeding... if we weren’t the ones carrying it out, that was. The others didn’t comment on its absurdity. They were clearly thinking the same thing as me.

“Omgosh! That sounds super fun!” Iroha exclaimed.

“I dunno, dude, that might be a lot for me to pull off, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“There’ll be a reward in this for me, right?” Sumire asked.

I ignored her.

“So it’s settled. Next Friday, eight o’clock. Don’t be late.” We looked at each other and nodded. “We’ll show her just how much we have it in for her!”

All together, the 05th Floor Alliance let out an ominous cheer. Time to invite Mashiro to our Friday evening party.

Saturday. Six days before the party.

I rang the doorbell.

No response.

I rang twice more.

No response.

I rang again and again and again and again and again and again and again and aga—

“S-Stop it. What do you think you’re doing so early on a Saturday?” The castle door finally opened, revealing a drowsy, pajama-clad, bed-headed Princess Mashiro.

“Wanna come over to my place next Friday for a party?” I gave her my sweetest smile.

“Go away!”

Sunday. Five days before the party.

Click.

“Huh?”

Click, click, click.

“The bell’s not workin’. Weird.”

Click, click, click, click, click, click, click, click, click, click, click, click, click, click.

Again and again I rang the bell, but ring the bell did not. Neither did it summon its master.

No way she unplugged it..

How dare she learn from experience? If I couldn't get her to answer the door, there was no way I could invite her to the party.

I decided to leave it for the day.

Just kidding.

Instead, I took the thirty posters I printed about the party and stuffed them all through her mail slot.

Monday. Four days before the party.

"Can I talk to you?"

I scribbled on a page of my notebook, scrunched it up, and tossed it at Mashiro at her desk next to mine. I watched her pout as she read it before turning her attention back to the blackboard.

After a second, she seemed to change her mind. Writing down something on the note, she tore it off and sent it flying back in my direction with an aim that didn't seem to care whether it hit me in the face or not.

"What was with all those posters yesterday? Are you trying to harass me?"

"If you'd read them, you'd know I was trying to invite you to a party."

"Stuffing trash through my mail slot isn't exactly inviting, and... never mind. Just leave me alone."

"By the way, what's your LIME ID? It'd be easier if I could text you instead of having to write notes."

"No. Bye."

Well, I tried.

It looked like forced kidnapping was going to be the only way to get Snow White out of her impregnable fortress. I wasn't about to worry, though. I still had time to make this work.

Tuesday. Three days before the party.

"So anyway, about Fri—"

"Don't talk to me in the classroom."

Wednesday. Two days before the party.

"So anyway, about Fri—"

"Don't talk to me in the hallways. Also, stop stalking me."

Thursday. One day before the party.

"So anyway, about Fri—uh, tomorrow, I guess..."

No reaction.

"I'm holdin' a little welcome party for you. We'll order some pizza, get some drinks... Sumire-sensei will be the only one with alcohol, of course. Since you're my neighbor and all, I was thinkin' we

could try and get along, y'know?"

"Listen..."

A response! Finally, after all these years! (Well, days.)

"This is probably the worst place you could've chosen to pick up a girl."

Ugh. Is it so wrong to try and pick up girls in front of a bathroom? I hoped that if I caught her when her need was highest, she'd let down her guard and accidentally say yes.

The area was steadily getting busier, and more and more people were starting to witness me trying to stop this girl going into the bathroom. I could feel their suspicious gazes on the back of my neck. It was only a matter of time before someone'd run and get a teacher.

I turned on my heel and suavely walked away. Everyone fell for it, probably.

In the end, though I tried again and again to invite Mashiro, nothing I did managed to pull her away from her commitment to solitude.

It was the evening before the party. After school, I stopped off at a nearby supermarket.

Food seemed to be appearing in my cart as I pushed it along. The source? Iroha, of course, who was fetching items left, right, and center.

Carrots, onions, potatoes, meat and sides, as well as several bottles of tea and water. Also, mountains of snacks, which I was sure were only to her tastes and no one else's.

"I can't wait for tomorrow's party!" Iroha said, shooting me an innocent smile.

She was still in her uniform, and today, didn't have her headphones on her (or any missing buttons, for that matter). She still had an air of stylishness about her, but overall she was giving off her perfect teacher's pet vibe.

It all seemed so horribly fake to me.

"You can be yourself, y'know? You don't have to put on that sweetie-pie act just 'cause there's a lot of people around."

"Silly Senpai. I get discounts and stuff this way! Which means you get to pay less, too."

"I guess..."

I saw these parties as a way to invest in my relationships, and I didn't want to spare any expense. That said, shaving off a little cost here or there wouldn't hurt either.

Coming shopping with Iroha in her teacher's pet mode wasn't

exactly how I wanted to get those discounts, though.

“Oh my! You two are looking as cute together as always!”

“Hello!” Iroha greeted the lady who was giving out free samples.

“My, you’re always so polite, Iroha-chan! You’ve really gotten lucky with her, Aki-kun!”

“R-Right, but we’re not actually—”

“No need to be shy, my dear!” the lady said, patting me kindly on the shoulder.

This was exactly why I didn’t like coming here with Iroha. I bumped into her here a lot, too, which was no wonder since we lived in the same building. At first, we decided to go around the store together just because we were there at the same time anyway, but at some point we ended up coming here together.

Unfortunately, that led the women who worked here (and who had been for several years) to believe that we were a young couple who just loved to go shopping together.

But wait, there’s more!

“So these sausages are from Germany or something?” Iroha asked.

“That’s right. They’re thick and juicy, with a good texture. Here, try some!”

“Wow, it’s delicious! What’s this gooey stuff inside it?” Iroha nibbled at the sausage enthusiastically.

I checked the package just to make sure she wasn’t trying to make an obscure euphemism, and was relieved to find that there was cheese sauce in there. That didn’t stop her turning to me with a covert grin, though.

“Wanna try some, Senpai? Here, open wide!” She held out the toothpick towards me.

“Quit it.”

“No need to be shy!” the saleswoman repeated.

Iroha giggled as I pushed her hand away, smiling as a wife does to her grumpy husband. “Oopsie!”

“Oh, how mean you are to your girlfriend, Aki-kun! You should treat her with more care!”

Gimme a break.

There it was, this unrelated woman sticking her nose into a relationship that didn’t even exist. This happened whenever I reacted coldly to Iroha’s teasing. I just didn’t get it. Well, maybe this was what a couple looked like to other people. Not that I was an expert on the topic of couples, anyway.

It was just so incredibly *annoying* how everyone decided we were a couple. If I tried to deny it, they just told me to stop being shy. Facts had no place in their post-truth fantasies.

Not wanting to come shopping with Iroha alone, I’d invited Ozu,

too.

“No thanks. Third-wheeling isn’t really a good look.”

He was out. For some reason, he was under the impression that I *enjoyed* Iroha’s company.

Anyway, while I was busy with this inner monologue, there was still a sausage being pushed into my face.

Iroha was staring at me behind the steam rising up from the fragrant smoked meat, her eyes shining.

“Aren’t you gonna eat it, Senpai?”



“No. Come on.”

“...Oh.” She looked away, dejected.

Her hand holding the sausage drooped. The saleswoman’s eyes were frosty. As though they could sense the awkwardness in the air, shoppers passing by were glancing in our direction, though they quickly lost interest once they saw nothing exciting was going on.

The unbearable silence continued, broken only by Iroha’s quiet whimpering.

“Ugh, fine! I’ll eat the damn sausage!” I held out my hand with a huff, not able to take it any longer.

Iroha shook her head, holding the tender wiener close to her heart. “It’s fine... I’m sorry for being pushy.”

“N-No, I do want it.”

“R-Really? Then... I want you to show me. I want you to beg me for this sausage from the bottom of your heart. Pitch your desire to me like you’re in a business meeting.”

The audacity of this bitch! Did she realize we were in public right now? And she even lowered her voice so the saleslady wouldn’t hear. Under her sweet, innocent mask, I could tell she had the most devilish grin on her face.

I didn’t want to give in to her. But I couldn’t go off at her in a crowded place like this, either.

“Oh, I would love to eat your sausage. I want it from the very depths of my being.”

“I told you to pitch it.”

“According to a survey conducted by me, and asked to me, 98% of me wants to eat the sausage, and 84% of me wants you to feed it to me. Can’t argue with those numbers, can you?”

In the face of my astounding scientific findings, Iroha slapped her hand to her mouth and looked away. I could see her whole body trembling. So she was laughing at my expense now, was she?

I wasn’t about to forget this in a hurry.

“O-Okay, you did good. I didn’t think you’d actually do it, though,” Iroha giggled.

“Excuse me, miss,” I addressed the saleslady. “See how she’s laughing at me? Don’t you get it now? The truth is, Iroha isn’t actually —”

“Welcome! Would you like to try some of our special cheesy sausage today?”

Dammit! She was so concerned with those sausages, she missed Iroha showing her true colors! Why couldn’t she stick her nose in our business when it *actually mattered*?! Or did Iroha have some kind of force field which made her invisible whenever she wanted to be an

ass?

I chomped at the sausage while cursing the heavens above.

“How is it, Senpai?”

“It’s delicious.”

“Aaah! I knew you liked sausages! I love it when you quit being so stubborn!” Iroha grinned at me while the saleswoman wasn’t looking.

“My love of meat doesn’t make you any less annoying.” The juicy meat caressing my taste buds was the one thing I couldn’t complain about right now. I just hated the way Iroha boasted about it. “Also, stop saying the word ‘love.’ You don’t love anything about me.”

“But I do love you! It’s not somethin’ I tell just anyone, y’know!”

“You’re like the polar opposite of her. You know that?”

“Huh? You mean Mashiro-senpai?”

“Yup. All she ever talks about is how much she hates me. Well, when she talks at all, that is.”

Iroha saying she loved me when nothing could be further from the truth was annoying, but so was Mashiro saying she hated me when I’d done nothing to deserve it. If only I could find myself a girl who sat somewhere in the middle, but fate was rarely so kind.

“Oh, that reminds me! She still hasn’t said she’ll come to the party, has she?” Iroha asked as she stretched up to grab a can of tomato juice from a high shelf.

“Nope.”

I asked Ozu and Sumire to help me out with the party and everything, too. Meanwhile, Iroha was in charge of cooking and getting us some side dishes. The only thing holding us back was my failure to get Mashiro interested in coming at all.

“She ignores me whenever she can. I dunno what I can do about it, really.”

Iroha gave a thoughtful hum as she continued jumping for the juice.

“Y’know, Senpai, maybe you’re being too nice to her.”

“Huh?”

“I know your plan was to be as super annoying as possible, but I know you can be way more annoying than what I’ve seen... Grr.”

No matter how many times she jumped, Iroha still couldn’t get her hands on the tomato juice. She glared at the top shelf, as though it were responsible for all her life problems.

“You’re always really annoying with me and the others, after all. Remember when you were trying to get us on board with the whole Honeyplace Works thing?”

“Well, yeah. That was ’cause it was the best option for all of us. I had to be persistent with that one.”

“Yeah, and you convinced us all in the end, right? It was like...

you knew just what we were good at, or what we all wanted out of life without even havin' to ask."

"I just don't like it when people are forced to change or give things up to conform to others' standards. I mean, imagine having a dream, or a certain talent which you can't make use of because your environment won't allow it. It's just dumb."

"Yeah, and while we were all worrying about how our dreams were unrealistic, you helped us snap out of it and realize that we *could* achieve what we wanted. That's why you're the best producer in the world. Okay..." Iroha gave one last leap and reached out as far as she could. This time, the tomato juice made it into her hands. "Yes! ...Ah... Aaaah!"

She failed to stick the landing. She lost her balance, began to wobble, and was about to crash into the shelves. Much as she annoyed me, I wasn't about to let her fall. I wrapped my arms around her stomach to keep her in place.

"Be careful, dumbass!"

"Haha! Thanks!" Iroha grinned at me, holding the can of tomato juice close to her heart. "But seriously, you saved us from making a serious mistake once we left school. That's why Ozuma likes you so much, too. I know you were kinda worried that Mashiro-senpai doesn't want friends, or that you're comin' on too strong, but honestly I think your instincts are right on this one. They always are, after all."

"So you're saying I should go all out? Yeah, I guess I was holdin' back a little before..."

I thought that a calm and logical approach to the whole thing would go down better, but maybe I wasn't really making the best use of my talents. I realized now that letting Mashiro decide to join us herself wasn't gonna work. As long as I believed this was the right path for her, I was the one who had to give it my all to show her that. Mashiro needed this. She needed our friendship to have a brighter future. If I had to annoy her extra hard temporarily to make it happen, then so be it.

I thought back to when I suggested to the other members of 05th Floor Alliance that we should aim for a job at Honeyplace Works. Ozu and Sumire looked at me like I was crazy. They said it was impossible, but when I convinced them it was what was best for all of us, they eventually came around.

Firstly, there was Ozu, a young man with extraordinary talent, but who could only communicate with a small group of people. Those people being me, his family, and any human with a certain level of intelligence.

Then there was Sumire, a naturally creative woman who loved to draw ever since she was little. Though she was a talented artist, she

was pressured into becoming a teacher because teaching was what her family had always done.

It was because I convinced Tsukinomori-san and took away every obstacle to achieving their dreams, that *they* now had an unconditional offer to join Honeyplace Works. They didn't even need to take a test for it. (Good for them.)

Considering the extreme lengths I was going to for that, it was no wonder that Iroha thought I was holding back with Mashiro this past week. Once she was stable, I let go of Iroha and took the can of tomato juice from her.

"Thanks, Iroha. You've opened my eyes."

"Yes! I love it when you get serious! I can't wait to see what happens!" Iroha shot me a sinister, fun-loving grin. And for once, I grinned right back at her.

Prepare yourself, Mashiro. I'm not about to leave you alone, even if you end up hating me more than anyone else. I'm about to show you the most efficient way to make friends and live a fun, happy school life!

I had it in for her now.

"Sounds like you're really gettin' fired up now," Ozu said. "I can't wait to see what you've got in store!"

"I dunno how far I'll be able to take it, but you can bet I'm goin' all out!"

Interlude: Mashiro's Feelings

I just wanted to curl up in my bed and spend the rest of my days as a toasty cinnamon bun. I wanted to be a shellfish tucked away in its shell on the beach; who needed the outside world when you could be rocked gently by the waves forever?

I felt that way for a long time. Even now I felt like that sometimes. I knew it was an impossible wish. But that's why I transferred schools.

To tell you the truth, I was happy to see Aki again. Yes, even though he glimpsed my panties. A pair I'd just picked at random from the drawer that morning. Despite the dire embarrassment, I was happy. Happy that he was talking to me as though nothing had changed since old times. He hadn't changed a bit, either.

"I'm holdin' a little welcome party for you on Friday."

He'd said those words over and over. On the way to school, *at* school, in front of my apartment... The look on his face every time he invited me made my heart ache. I knew he was trying to be nice. Even after all this time, I knew that he was just like that. I knew because, even when we hadn't seen each other, I'd been watching over what he was doing this whole time.

That was why I wanted to make a change. If I did... If I reached out to him, maybe *I* could change, too.

How wrong I was.

Who was that kouhai hanging around Aki? I'd never seen her before. I already knew about Kohinata Ozuma and Kageishi Sumire from eavesdropping on Aki and my dad's phone calls.

But I didn't know that there was a pretty girl like that hanging out with him, too. Not only that, but the two of them ran around like the most lovestruck couple I'd ever seen.

Wait. All of this was just jealousy. Ugly, horrible jealousy. All my feelings were based on mere scraps of memories and information I'd scraped together during our years apart. They were superficial at best. Who was I to be jealous of his friend's sister?

I was so unbelievably happy when my dad suggested having Aki as my fake boyfriend, ashamed as I am to admit it. That was exactly why the despair that hit me when I saw her—Kohinata Iroha—was so devastating.

I know what you're thinking. I think it's pathetic, too.

When things broke down at my previous school, I started to hate

going. Then I learned about 05th Floor Alliance, and ended up getting close to all of them...

““Stop stalking me?” I scoffed at my own choice of words.

Who was really the stalker here? *I* was the one who begged my dad to let me go to the same school as Aki, and even make it so I ended up in the same class as him. I was the one who was being underhanded.

I hated the fact that I was treating Aki so horribly, just because of the jealousy stabbing at my chest. I hated the possibility that if I tried to get close to him, I might end up getting pushed away. I hated that there was already a girl who Aki got on so well with.

What I hated most of all, was that I was in the exact same spot I was before transferring. Miserable, self-loathing, and lonely.

I hated everything. Like a stubborn child who refuses to do what her mother tells her is best.

Friday... That's tomorrow.

I rolled over on the bed, and stared at the wall next to me. The wall connecting my room to Room 502.

I wondered if Aki slept right on the other side of the wall. I found myself squinting instinctively, but of course that wasn't enough to give me the x-ray vision I needed to find out.

I mumbled into my duvet. “I'm not going to your dumb party.”

If it was just me and Aki, maybe I could deal with it. But I knew it was going to be filled with guests who were all smiles and cheerful conversation. I couldn't do it. I couldn't fit in with those kinds of people.

Even if I tried to talk to Aki one-on-one, he would just get snatched away by someone who was more cheerful, and better at conversation than me. Who would be left for me to talk to then? Strangers, that's who. In a fun place surrounded by people, I would just end up feeling more and more alone.

I hated the very idea of it. There was no way I was going. No matter how much I loved Aki, and how many times he invited me, I wasn't going.

Chapter 8: Me and My Friends Have It In for Mashiro So We Can Help Her

It was Friday, the day of Mashiro's welcome party.

I tried to talk to her whenever I could. First period, second period, third period, fourth period, lunchtime... but every single time she ignored me, putting up an unbreakable A.T. Barrier between us.

Finally, the day came to an end. The moment homeroom ended, I turned to look at Mashiro's desk, but she had already gathered up all her things and disappeared from the classroom. Clearly, she had been expecting me to try and catch her.

"Is everything ready on your end?" I asked Ozu, who was setting up his laptop at the desk behind mine.

He grinned at me. "All good over here. Though I'm pretty sure being forced to set up a program like this in under a week violates some kinda labor laws."

"I only asked 'cause I knew you're good enough to handle it. You finished up yesterday, right?"

"Yeah... at the cost of some sweet, sweet shut-eye." Ozu added a yawn.

"Don't worry, you can call in a favor from me whenever you want for this. Just bear with me for now, 'kay?"

"Sure thing, chief."

I pulled out my phone and opened up LIME before starting a group call with everyone.

"Operation PT is a-go," I announced. "Get into position, everyone."

"Yes, sir!" Iroha, Ozu, and Sumire all replied at once.

I immediately shot up from my chair and went chasing after Mashiro. I sped down the corridor, narrowly avoided slipping a few times, and charged down the stairs before finally spotting Mashiro at the school entrance.

"Mashiro!"

"A-Ah! Wh-What are you doing?! Why are you chasing me?"

"I need to talk to you!"

"I-I already said I'm not going to your dumb party!"

"Oh, so you remembered that it's today? I thought you weren't interested."

"I... I didn't say it was today. Besides, you've been bugging me

about it all week, so of course I'd remember..."

"I guess so. Well, no worries, okay? You gotta be the one to make the decision in the end. I won't force you if you don't wanna come."

"...Really?"

"Really really."

"I dunno if I believe that." Mashiro paused. "If you're not going to make me go, why did you come chase after me?"

"This isn't about the party. I just wanted to walk home with you."

Immediately, Mashiro's eyes narrowed like a tiny munchkin cat with its haunches up. Considering how I'd been treating her this entire week, I shouldn't have been surprised how wary she was of me.

"I mean, we live in the same building, right? Makes sense to go home together."

I really wasn't asking much here. Surely she could humor me just this once? I could understand why she'd find it difficult to attend a party with a bunch of strangers, but walking together with just me shouldn't be too big a deal. It was just a teeny-tiny alteration to her daily routine. I mean, come on. To refuse something like this, she'd have to really, *really* hate me, like, more than anyone else on the entire planet, and I doubted—

The moment she had her shoes on, she was racing away.

I... I guess things are worse than I thought?

I stood there in shock for a while, long after she disappeared from view.

Thinking back, I couldn't really think of anything I'd done to her that *wasn't* desperately annoying, so maybe I should've expected this after all.

If this were a romcom light novel, I found myself thinking, *something like this would definitely end up sorting itself out*. But then I remembered that it was Ozu, not I, who held that peculiar power in his palm.

The girls in *my* life all hated my guts. Even the non-picky girls avoided me like the plague.

So if I was going to crack this nut, I really had to give it my all. And giving my all was something that I, Ooboshi Akiteru, was particularly good at.

"You're not getting away that easy, Mashiro! I'm gonna walk home with you no matter what!" I cried out after her.

"Why... Wh... Why are you following me?!" Mashiro asked through gasping breaths.

"Don't be so full of yourself! I'm just goin' back to *my* place."

"You're going back to 'your place' while... while running like a... a madman!"

Both Mashiro and I were racing down the sidewalk, long running out of breath. At first, she outran me easily, but she was a shut-in up until last week, after all. It wasn't long until she was gasping for air, and her steps were becoming unwieldy. Then there was me, who worked out every day. There was no way she could beat me when it came to stamina. I reached out my hand to grab her, but I just fell short.

"I-I'm... going... going... a different way!" Mashiro darted into a backstreet, forcing me to come to a sudden stop.

"H-Hold it!" I called out.

"See! You *are* following me!"

"So what if I am?! Is stalking a crime?!"

"So you admit it!" Mashiro yelled back at me, continuing through the narrow backstreet.

She ran and ran, pushing past whatever cardboard boxes and trash lay in her way. The boxes and their contents scattered over the path in front of me, hindering my progress. Meanwhile, I set my eyes on her and kept up the chase, ignoring the black cat whose tail I accidentally stepped on in the process.

"Wh... What do you care... about me, anyway? Y-You don't need me to... to have fun at your party! I... I can't barge in when... when you guys are already so close!"

"Who... Who else are you gonna hang with?!"

I heard her gasp.

"Have you even spoken to anyone except me this past week? There are forty kids in our class, you know! How many have you talked to?"

"S-Stop... Stop harassing me!"

I knew it was a mean question to ask. I already knew that the answer was a big fat zero, from all the time I'd spent hounding her this week. But the purpose of my cruel question wasn't just to upset her.

"Is this the kinda life you changed schools for? It's not, right?!"

"Y-You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Look, I'm sorry about what happened at the restaurant. I'll apologize as many times as it takes. I'll even get on my knees and beg for forgiveness, if you want! You can even remind me about it every day for the rest of my life. I'll buy you sweets, or grab you lunch, or whatever you want. I'm not gonna ask you to forgive me, and I don't care if you hate me for it forever, but..." I took a deep breath. "Just stop lying to everyone by pretending you're happy with your life the way it is now!"

There was a pause. I saw her body tremble. But still, she didn't turn around. She shook her head and kept on running. Soon, we were

out of that backstreet and back on a main road. I continued to chase Mashiro, who dived into a sea of cars and shouted apologies at the drivers who hurled insults at her. I chased and chased until we ended up by a riverbank.

It was clear that she wasn't thinking straight at this point. Why else would she choose to run up a slope?

"Aaand... gotcha!"

It was just as she was reaching the top of the slope that Mashiro stumbled, and I finally caught up to her.

The elation of my victory was quickly crushed by the reality of the situation.

"Huh?"

"Aaah!"

Mashiro had come to a very sudden stop, and there I was, charging into her at full speed. There was no way her petite, feminine body was going to be able to withstand mine, which had all the mass of a full-grown man.

She screamed. I yelled. Our bodies colliding, we ended up flying over the low fence behind her and rolling down the other side of the slope in a tangle of limbs.

At the bottom of that slope lay the river itself, as if I have to tell you. Its only saving grace was that it wasn't particularly deep. At least drowning wasn't on the menu today.

Everything else about this situation was ass, though.

"Uugh! Gah! Where the hell'd this water come from? Satan's sewer pipe?" I coughed and spat.

Mashiro sat up and spluttered next to me. "I-I'm soaked!"

"Mashiro, are you... o...kay?"

"Huh? What's the matter, Aki?" Mashiro asked, having picked up on the strange crack in my voice.

The next moment, she understood.

You know too, right? What happens when someone falls into a river? If not, grab a seat 'cause I'm about to tell you.

Her uniform was completely soaked and clinging tightly to her body underneath. Her round thighs, her socks, her lovely hair, her pale white skin... Small drops of water dripped from every last inch of her like melting snow on a frosty morning. I know I'm trying to be poetic here, but to be honest, there was only one word to describe it:

Hot.

Sorry to be crude, but there was no other word for it. Maybe I was just relieved that we came out unscathed. Usually, social expectations would keep those kinds of thoughts from bubbling to the surface, but right now I didn't have the strength to hold them back. She was so mysteriously beautiful right then, that it felt like my hand would go

straight through her if I tried to touch her. I just couldn't look away.

Mashiro probably realized just what sort of state her half-transparent uniform was in. Her white skin was flushed red as a poison apple, and her lips began to tremble.

"St-Stop... Stop looking at me, you pervert!"

"I'm sorry! You just look so hot right now!"

"Seriously?! *That's* your excuse?!"

She had a point. I really didn't need to admit that out loud. Mashiro scrambled backwards, water splashing around her feet as she went. All the while she tried to cover her body with her hands. She didn't get very far though, as the heavy water pressure began to hinder her movements.

"Careful!" I yelled, darting forward and catching her wobbling body.

Our wet bodies were pressed together, and our faces were mere centimeters apart. I felt my heart starting to pound, and I had to look away to avoid making yet another social faux pas.

"Tell me when I can let go," I said. "I'm not planning to hold on to you forever."

"O-Okay..." Mashiro looked away.

Either my plan to reassure her I wasn't up to any funny business had worked, or she was simply embarrassed. Whichever it was, the tension in her body quickly loosened as she allowed me to support her. The moment she was steady again, she let out a sigh of relief.

"You can let go now."

"All right. Don't fall over again, okay?"

"...Okay."

She was still wobbling a little as we made our way back up the slope, so I kept my arms out just in case. The moment we were past the railing and back in familiar territory, we both flopped to the ground, exhausted.

"This is the worst day ever."

"Agreed."

"We must really look like a couple now, huh? We're even pulling off the same 'soaking wet' look." I didn't mean anything by it. It was just the first thing that came to mind now that I could properly see the state we were in.

And then, Mashiro began to giggle.



“Are you kidding? This look’ll never catch on!”

“Maybe it’s just God’s way of blessing our fake relationship, then.”

“More like Satan’s.”

“Huh? If he’s after us, I guess we’d better say our prayers. Maybe then God can make this into a ‘fond memory’ for us.”

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up. Curses don’t just disappear overnight,” Mashiro mumbled. All of a sudden, she looked so sad somehow. Like a girl hiding from her angry parents in the corner of a dark room.

“Guess not. Anyway, why are you so sure you don’t wanna come to the party?”

If she didn’t seem lonely before, she definitely did now.

She had worked so hard to convince her dad to send her to a new school, and, far from making friends, she didn’t even look like she was having fun in class. Even if she told me she was fine, there was no way I could believe that at this point. Remember, Ozu was supposed to be the dense protagonist, not me.

That was why I had to ask her. Even though I knew it was a sensitive subject, I just couldn’t leave her dwelling in loneliness like this. I knew that the real Mashiro had to be hiding just beneath the surface.

“You really are stubborn, you know, going through all this just for me. I think you need your head examined.”

“So I’m the weirdo, huh? Listen, even if you pretend to be normal in class, right now you look just as messed up as me.”

“I’m not really trying to hide that part of me at school, though. But I feel like I’ve seen another side to you now. Your friends must be similar...”

By “friends,” did she mean the rest of the 05th Floor Alliance? I wanted to ask why she’d bring them up now, but I hesitated, and Mashiro continued before I could voice my question.

“I’m sorry, Aki. It’s not you. I don’t hate you, really. So please don’t hate me, either.”

“What makes you think I hate you? Though I guess it’s a relief to hear you don’t feel that way about me.” I smiled awkwardly, noticing that there were tears welling up in her eyes.

I knew that there was something in Mashiro’s past that she had difficulty talking about. That was exactly why I was determined to avoid any sort of words or actions that would force it to come to the surface, despite my constantly harassing her. But now, Mashiro was trying to talk. She was trying to come out of her shell, all by her own power.

“Um... the truth is... I’m scared.”

“Scared?”

“Scared I won’t fit in with your friends. Scared that they won’t like me and start ignoring me, and then you’ll start ignoring me too... I know it’s weird, but...”

“It’s totally understandable.”

“Huh?”

I understood completely, and I wanted her to know that. “You’re preoccupied with the whole fake-couple thing, so maybe you haven’t realized it yet, but basically 99% of the class already ignores me. I know what it feels like to be invisible.”

“Wh-What? But...” Mashiro’s eyes were wide with disbelief.

“They’re not doing it to be mean, or anything. I just don’t stand out. My grades are average, my looks are average. I’m just not very interesting. I’m as average as average can be.”

“That’s not true! You’re the head of the 05th Floor Alliance!”

“Oh, you’ve heard of us?”

Did I mention our name to her already?

“That uh, my... my dad told me,” she said.

“Oh, right. Makes sense.”

Tsukinomori-san loved his daughter as much as he loved women. I wasn’t surprised that he wouldn’t mind breaking a few NDAs when sharing things about his life with her. Not that we had an NDA with him.

“Y-You’re making a really interesting game, right? He said you’re already making so much money, even though you’re just a high schooler.”

“We split the profits,” I explained, “and most of them are going into making the next game anyway. I’m not as rich as you think I am.”

“But still, you’re in charge of a game-development team! And people of all ages are playing it, too! That’s... That’s just so incredible. You should be super popular!”

“No one’s clamoring to befriend a game dev, y’know. Besides, we haven’t told anyone at school.”

Mashiro frowned at me. “Why not? Are you... Are you scared they’ll tease you for it?”

“That’s not it. I just don’t want all the attention. Otherwise I’d probably get big-headed.” I could really see that happening, to be honest.

“But don’t you want the glory?”

“Course I do. I’m human just like everyone else.” Attention and validation was something everyone was after in this world, and it wasn’t like being invisible made me happy. “Like I said, I don’t wanna get a big head. I’d probably waste so much of my time bathing in the attention and bragging, that it’s better to keep it a secret. It’d be more

efficient to keep that time for the important things, right?"

Mashiro stared at me for a while, mulling over my answer.

"You're a freak," she finally decided, smiling more brilliantly than she had so far.

"So you're really not coming?"

Mashiro and I had walked home together, our water-sodden clothes making us look like a punk version of Hansel and Gretel. We finally made it to the lobby of our apartment building.

Mashiro glanced up at me before shaking her head. "I'm sorry... I appreciate the invite, though."

"They're nice guys, really. They'll make sure you feel welcome and all."

"I know, I just... wouldn't be comfortable."

"That's fair, I guess. All right, you win. I won't badger you about it anymore."

We stepped into the waiting elevator and stayed silent the rest of the way up.

In the end, I wasn't able to persuade Mashiro. She was more withdrawn than I'd realized, scared even to make acquaintances, let alone friends. It'd only been a few days since we were reunited, so maybe it was a little naive to think she'd open up to me so soon.

We even ended up falling into the river and laughing together, but Mashiro still wasn't ready to put aside her fears. I knew she was hurting, but even though I thought that being with people would be for the best, I decided to respect her decision for the time being.

"Goodbye, then." Mashiro turned around to return to her room the moment the elevator arrived at the fifth floor.

I smiled as she went. "You'll at least talk to me normally at school from next week, right?"

Mashiro paused. "Okay."

I watched her totter towards Room 501, the room right next to mine, not moving until she got to her door.

"Huh? Did I forget to lock up this morning?" Mashiro stared at the doorknob in confusion.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, um... My door's unlocked. That's weird."

"D'you think someone broke in?"

"I-I'm not sure..." She looked up at me anxiously.

This was her first time living alone, and she still wasn't used to her new home. To find her door unexpectedly unlocked on top of all of that must have been really frightening. It'd be fine if it turned out she just forgot to lock it, but what if it *was* a burglar? And what if the burglar was still inside?

The color drained from Mashiro's face. I wondered if those same

fears were flooding her head right now.

“Let’s take a look. Don’t worry, I’ll go in with you.”

“Okay...”

I positioned myself in front of her just in case, and stepped into her dark apartment. We kicked off our shoes before we moved in deeper. The two of us crept forward, practically clinging to each other.

The apartment was deathly silent, with not a hint of activity. Our footsteps seemed to thunder off the walls despite how lightly we were treading. My heart pounded louder with every step, and I could feel a sheen of sweat forming on my forehead. Mashiro was clinging to my shirt like a lost child looking for its parent.

Together, we stopped in front of the door to the living room. I looked down at Mashiro. She gulped before nodding at me. I grabbed the doorknob, then swung the door open with full force and pushed Mashiro inside.

“Huh?”

“I’m not gonna try and convince you anymore.”

Mashiro turned round and looked at me, confused.

“But I’m not about to respect your feelings, either!” I grinned at her with all the malevolence of a serial killer watching the death of his rival, now ready to take his place as the god of a new world.

Bang!

The next moment, gunshots rang through the air.

Just kidding. They weren’t gunshots.

Mashiro stood flummoxed in the middle of the room, as bullets—I mean, confetti—rained down upon her.

“Welcome to the fifth floor!”

Welcome, Mashiro-chan! yelled the banner on the living room wall. All sorts of different teas and alcohol lined the dining table. There was juice, fancy takeout food, and a large, fragrant pot of Iroha’s homemade vegetable curry. To top it all off, Iroha, Ozu, and Sumire were standing ’round the table with their recently-exploded party poppers.

I had delivered Mashiro straight into the hands of the hungry witch waiting in her delicious gingerbread house. Poor Gretel probably wasn’t expecting that her beloved brother would lead her to her doom.

“What... What’s all this?” she asked.

“I told you we were plannin’ a welcome party for you, right?”

“I know, but... why is it here? You guys broke into my apartment?”

“Trust me, I tell Iroha every day just how much of a crime breaking and entering is,” I said.

“You mean—”

“But this is different. We didn’t break into anywhere. This is my place.”

“What? No. This is *my* apartment.”

“Oh? Did you even read the doorplate?” I asked.

“I don’t have a doorplate. I just moved here after all.”

“Which is why it was so easy to fool ya. All I had to do was take the doorplate off my place.”

“But... But this is...”

“Take a look. Is this how your furniture’s arranged? Have you ever been in this room before?”

“No...” Mashiro admitted after a pause.

“Your Honor, I rest my case.”

“But I’m sure I came through my own door!” Mashiro protested.

It was time to give her another hint.

“How do you remember which door is yours?”

“Well, it’s the furthest down the hall.”

“Right. Humans identify and memorize their location by the environment around them.”

Mashiro’s memory of this place was still fuzzy. While she’d get used to it after coming and going so many times, at this point she was still using basic information to find her way around.

“You remember which room is yours ’cause it’s the one at the end of the hall.”

“Of course. The door at the end. The door I just came through!”

“Hold it! You *didn’t* go through the door at the end. Otherwise you wouldn’t be in this room. Your testimony contradicts the evidence.”

She still looked utterly confused. I didn’t blame her.

“Come and take a look.” I led her out into the hallway again.

When we opened the door to her apartment, there was nothing but a solid wall on our left. Mashiro frowned at it while I reached out my hand towards it. The next moment...

Mashiro gasped.

“It’s just a screen. We made sure it had the exact same texture and color as the wall and then we set it up here.”

“W-Woah. Yeah... You can see where it’s been pushed a bit too hard to fit...”

“By the way, I chased you this afternoon so I could give the others time to set this all up.”

“You really put that much thought into this?”

“Yeah. We put together all sort of back-up plans, just in case you refused, or somethin’ went wrong.”

If Mashiro accepted the invitation, we wouldn’t have needed to go through all this trouble, of course. Since she didn’t, I ended up chasing her, and was careful not to let her go straight home.

“We broke our backs settin’ this up, y’know! All just to fool you. Aki’s requests are always insane, and always on a tight schedule.”

“But you always succeed somehow. I guess that’s why we’re friends.” I smiled at Ozu, who had come out to join us.

Ozu was arguably the most important member of the 05th Floor Alliance when it came to getting tricky stuff like this done. As the programmer, he had all the technical skills of the group. In just a few days, he’d managed to create a program capable of manipulating incredibly detailed images, using Sumire’s artistic eye for help along the way.

“Looks like Operation PT was a huge success!”

PT. Partition Trap.

“Why?!” Mashiro finally broke through her confusion, and was now trembling in anger. “Why would you do something like this, just to get me to go to your stupid party?”

“You’ll get it once you come back in. I promise that none of these guys are the type to ignore you.”

Mashiro was simply too naive. She had always been trapped inside her head, shut inside her room. So much so, that she couldn’t even recognize a fake wall. In her eyes, she was the protagonist of her own world. No one else’s view mattered to her. That was what made her so easy to trick, and we did it to teach her a simple lesson: The world *didn’t* have it in for her.

“B-But... you can’t expect me to make friends with... with these people just like that.”

“C’m on, Mashiro-senpai! Lighten... Woah!” Iroha, who had just jumped out of my apartment to fling her arms around Mashiro, was greeted by a soggy sensation. She immediately pulled back. “What happened to your uniform?! Did Aki-senpai do something to you?! You can tell us! We’ll be your witnesses!”

“Can it. Can’t you see I’m soaked, too?”

“Ooh, she’s a squirter, huh?!”

“Woah, grab a drink. You’re thirsty as heck,” I said.

Did this girl not have a shred of decency?

And why was I asking a question I already knew the answer to?

“Oh, my sweet, innocent Aki! You poor child of summer! All girls my age know about that kinda thing!” Iroha turned her attention to Mashiro, giving her a small tap on the tip of her nose. “Listen up, Mashiro-san! You’ve got it wrong! The four of us ain’t friends at all!”

“What?” Mashiro blinked.

“Well, I guess Aki-senpai and my brother are. Actually, they’re probably more like lovers! Wouldn’t that be hot?!”

“Omgosh, totally hot! You’ve got the super-sadistic cool and collected Aki as the top and the princely Ozu as the bottom! It’s just

too perfect!”

“Get back inside, you drunkard. Also, at least wait till Mashiro’s arrived to start drinking!”

“Come on! It’s your fault for leaving me in the room alone with the drinks!”

Ladies and gentlemen, our class’s role model, Sumire-sensei. Someone who was incapable of having a good time without getting hammered.

“Wh-What do you mean you aren’t friends? You get along so well!” Mashiro protested.

“Well, I mean. Aki’s not my friend. He’s my brother’s friend. And my brother’s not my friend ’cause he’s my brother. Then Sumire-chan-sensei can’t be my friend either, ’cause she’s a teacher. Get what I’m sayin’?”

“Right, it’s the same for me,” I chipped in. “Ozu’s my friend, but Iroha’s just his sister. And this drunkard is my excuse for a teacher.”

“That’s it! Detention!”

“What? For tellin’ the truth?”

Iroha shoved Sumire back inside to stop her wailing, then said over her shoulder, “We just happen to live on the same floor, so we decided to socialize a little, y’know? That’s all. Nothin’ to do with friendship.”

“Really? What about the game you’re all making together?”

“Huh? You know about that?” Iroha shot me a questioning glance.

I nodded back at her, realizing now that I’d failed to warn them.

“I guess that’s a pretty big deal, yeah. But it’s not really why we have parties like this. Otherwise I’d be left out, since I’ve done nothin’ for it!”

“That’s... true,” Mashiro said.

“In fact, I’ve done nothin’ to earn my invitation, and neither have these guys! None of us are friends or lovers, and most of us aren’t family, either. We were all just chuggin’ along, contributing nothing to society when Aki-senpai came along and—”

“Enough! You’ve said enough.” I slapped my hand over Iroha’s mouth to stop her explaining how the 05th Floor Alliance was formed.

It wasn’t an interesting tale in the least, and nothing Mashiro needed to know about, either.

“Anyway, you get it now? You’re Aki-senpai’s fake lover, and I’m your fake lover’s friend’s sister. That’s enough to qualify you to hang out with us! You don’t have to be friends with us to join the 05th Floor Alliance! In fact, you don’t even hafta live on the same floor! We got someone called Makigai Namako-sensei in our group too, and he lives like a billion miles away! But he’s still one of us!”

The moment Iroha mentioned the name “Makigai Namako,”

Mashiro made a strange noise and her face crumpled into a frown. She must've heard the name before if she knew about us as a group. He was the most famous member of the Alliance, given that he worked in the industry.

That his absence didn't affect the way we included him as one of us was the biggest proof that we didn't care for labels such as "friends."

"Do you get it now?"

"I-I can't believe you tricked me!"

She wasn't wrong there. What we did was kinda unfair.

"It worked though, right?"

"Yeah... Thanks." Though Mashiro was doing her best to keep up her frown, the happy flush to her cheeks was genuine.

First things first, Mashiro and I went to take a shower. We weren't gonna party while stinking of river water, after all.

Don't get the wrong idea though. She went back to her place and I showered at mine. Once I was done and out of my uniform, I waited outside for Mashiro to come back, and then the two of us went back to the living room where everyone was gathered.

Except they weren't there.

I could hear the sound of voices coming from the furthest bedroom of my three-bedroom apartment.

They'd better not be doing what I think they're doing...

"Everyone's gone," Mashiro said.

"They've transcended into the adult world."

"They've... what?!"

"This is probably gonna be your first time, right? Well, don't worry. I'll teach you everything you need to know."

"W-Wait a second! This is all too sudden!"

"Don't worry. The anxiety disappears pretty soon. Let's go, yeah?" I took Mashiro by the hand and led her forward.

She tried to resist, but I wasn't letting her go. It was too late for her to get out now. It was time to bring her down to my own filthy level.

"P-Please stop! I don't want... I mean, if it was just you, I wouldn't mind, but I don't want... to be part of your weird orgy!"

I ignored her quiet, unintelligible pleas, and opened the door. There was the noise of shuffling bodies.

"Sup, Aki. We were just gettin' started."

"Yay! Senpai's here! A threesome just ain't enough, y'know! The more the merrier!"

"A threesome?!" Sumire burst out laughing.

“Don’t say it like that! You’ll give Mashiro the wrong idea! Ah, thanks for that, Sumire-sensei! *Ron*. That’s 12,000 points for me!”

“No way!”

“Huh?” Mashiro was staring at the scene before her with a blank look at her face.

I didn’t know what she was expecting, but apparently it wasn’t this. I couldn’t blame her; after all, who did own an *automatic mahjong table* these days?

“What’s going on?” Mashiro asked slowly.

“We eat, we drink, and sometimes we play mahjong!” Sumire explained.

“Come join us! Four players is way better than three!” Iroha said.

“Whaddya think, Mashiro?” I asked.

“I’ve... I’ve only ever played online before.”

“Oh, I’ve heard that before.” Ozu sighed. “Anyone who uses that line ends up being super good.”

“For real! It’s like ‘Yeah, you want us to believe you’re crap, right?’” Iroha laughed.

“I wonder if she’ll beat you, Ozuma-kun? Though nothing beats my super awesome *hadaka tanki*!” Sumire grinned and rolled up her sleeves.

This was probably a good time to point out that she was the worst mahjong player I’d ever seen in my life, evidenced by how Ozu just called *ron* after her poor play.

The good thing about Sumire as a player was that she enjoyed the game no matter how many times she lost. I pushed down on Mashiro’s shoulders to make her sit.

She looked up at me with frightened eyes. “I-I don’t want to bet anything...”

“Don’t worry, we don’t get money involved. I’d never allow gambling under my roof!”

“All we’re betting is our dignity!” Iroha giggled.

Mashiro didn’t look reassured.

“Winning is everything!” Iroha continued. “C’mon, you can play instead of Aki-senpai! He won’t mind just this once, okay?”

“I won’t mind, huh?” I snapped. “Well... you’re right, actually.”

Unlike Iroha, I didn’t care whether Mashiro won or lost on my behalf.

“Go on, just join in for one game to start with. This is the kinda game that brings out the players’ true colors, too, so you’ll get to know them straight away,” I said.

“Okay... I’ll try.” Though she still seemed uncertain, Mashiro reached out to pick up her first tile.

That was how Mashiro's welcome party started off with a mahjong tournament. It was a pretty casual affair though, allowing everyone to introduce themselves and chat as the games went on. Names, interests, and favorite foods were shared all around the table. What started as light-hearted conversation soon moved on to the topic of late-night anime, one of Mashiro's passions. As she learned more and more about the others, the stiff expression on her face gradually loosened.

By the way, Ozu was consistently the strongest player in the tournament, using his logical mind to evaluate the strength of each of his hands. Mashiro was at zero points, having missed every opportunity to score, likely because she was nervous meeting so many people. We didn't allow for negative scores in our house rules, so she was on the cusp of losing.

"Ooh, you're in trouble now, Mashiro-san!" Iroha cackled. "All I need to do now is trash Ozuma and then I win! As for my prize, I think I'll choose an evening alone with Senpai! Haha, just kiddin'! Did I get y'r hopes up?!"

"No."

"Aww, c'mon! I know your tiny virgin brain's been obsessed with my boobs since the day we met!"

"Shut up and focus on the mahjong. Mashiro's dealing."

"Big deal! She hasn't declared *riichi* once!"

"Um... Iroha-chan?" Mashiro called out, her voice nearly lost among the noise of tiles being stacked.

"Sup?"

"Are you sure you're not... going out with Aki?"

"What?! Sure, we're datin'! We're totally in love!"

"Huh?"

"Just kidding! Gottem! Right?"

"Uh... Yeah, you did..."

Mashiro really needs to learn to stand up for herself...

"Careful, Mashiro. This one'll take any chance she can to get on your nerves."

"Hey! Quit makin' me look bad! I'm not gonna try and piss her off as much as you, so don't worry!"

"How about you leave me alone too, then?"

"Sorry, no can do! Pissing you off gives me life!"

"It doesn't take much, huh?" I sighed before noticing Mashiro was being awfully quiet. "Mashiro? What's wrong?"

She had completely stopped midway through discarding a tile, and even looked a little mad.

"You two get along really well considering you're not dating," she said.



“What? You jealous?” Iroha asked.

“O-Of course not!”

“I dunno, you’re actin’ awful sus. Besides, aren’t you fake dating him? Those kinda things always end up with one fallin’ for the other in the end, right?”

Mashiro gasped.

I didn’t get it. It was like Iroha had her wrapped around her little finger.

Wait... Unless...?

“Don’t be ridiculous! I’d never fall for a total pervert like him!”

“Damn, you’re almost as harsh as Senpai!” Iroha grinned.

“Huh?”

“What? Whaddya lookin’ at me for?” I asked.

“If you act like that with her, then... Aki, how do you really feel about Iroha-chan?”

“Oh, right. Well, I feel about her the same way you do about me.”

Yup. I hate her guts.

Mashiro stared at me in silence.

“Oh, now I get it!” Iroha studied Mashiro, a glint in her eye.

I didn’t know what was going on, but it sure seemed like trouble.

Why were the two girls looking at each other like that?

“Oh...”

“*Ron.*”

The victorious word was out of Mashiro’s mouth the moment Iroha dropped the tile in her hand.

“Thirteen orphans. That’s 48,000 points.”

“Wh-What?!”

“Sorry. I thought it was time for a comeback.”

“Damn. Getting a *yakuman* hand as the dealer, and at this stage? That’s insane!”

“Nooo! I was just about to win!” Iroha wailed, passing her scoring sticks over to Mashiro.

Mashiro smirked.

I guess stranger things happened every day. If Iroha had actually been paying attention, maybe she wouldn’t have discarded the exact tiles Mashiro needed for her thirteen orphans. I wondered what it was that was distracting her.

The evening wore on, and it was now past midnight.

I sighed as I looked upon the mess my room had become.

Everyone had gone back to their own places, leaving me with my table covered in mahjong tiles, and empty cans and bottles littering

the floor.

“Can’t believe those savages would just scuttle back to their rooms and leave me to clean up all this mess...”

Maybe it was my fault for letting them leave so easily. Ozu was the last one to go, and he *did* offer to help clean up, but I felt bad asking for his help now when he did so much work to make Operation PT a success. Mashiro was the guest of honor, so she got a pass. Iroha and Sumire were the real targets of my rage, but I’d be a fool to expect any better of them anyway.

At the end of the day, I was just glad that everything went just as planned. Going forward, I hoped this would help Mashiro open up a little, and that she’d be able to have fun in her last couple years of school.

Wait, what am I saying?

I’d just done Tsukinomori-san a huge favor.

Before you start lauding me as a hero or a saint though, remember that I only did this because it was in the best interests of the 05th Floor Alliance’s future. Mashiro benefiting from this was only a bonus. As long as this improved my relationship with her father, it didn’t really matter how it affected her (although I was glad it helped her out, of course).

I only went as far as I did for myself and my development team, and I did it with full knowledge that I risked causing Mashiro stress if it went wrong. Putting it like that made me realize just what a scumbag of a human being I was.

I’d been called heartless before.

It was in elementary school, and I was in a soccer match with another school. One of our members was terrible, to put it kindly, and I warned my team not to pass the ball to him. Once the teacher in charge caught wind, she scolded me. She told me to think about how that would make him feel. I only wanted to keep the ball away from him to give us the best chances of winning, but apparently that was “cruel.”

Later, the kid in question told me he was actually relieved that no one passed the ball to him, and that he didn’t even want to take place in the tournament to start with. He was worried that he’d just let the ball get stolen, and either let the team down or make a fool of himself.

He was okay with it, but everybody else said I was a real piece of work.

Since then, I’ve become a lot less narrow-minded, and now I can kind of see where my peers were coming from. I’d forgotten that my actions could have caused someone to get hurt. As long things ended up how I wanted, other people’s feelings didn’t matter. That was why they called me “heartless.”

I couldn't remember when I came to understand their point of view, but it all started making sense to me at some point along the way.

I guess all that stuff doesn't really matter anymore anyway...

At this point in life, I was committed to my lifestyle of maximum efficiency. Even if that meant other people got hurt. Because, on the other side of the coin, there were people who benefited from my life choices.

Just as I was finished cleaning up and piling the garbage bags in the corner of the living room, I heard a knock. It wasn't at the door, though; it was at the window that led out onto the balcony.

What sort of person would be knocking at a five-story window at this time of night? It was either going to be a burglar, or some other troublemaker.

I decided to repurpose the broom from cleaning tool to weapon, and slowly made my way towards the glass door hidden behind the curtain. The tapping noise continued. I reached out to unlock it.

I swept the curtain aside and thrust the window open before bringing the broom down *hard* on the head of the person outside.

"Take that!"

There was a satisfying *bonk* followed by a scream. The evildoer fell to the ground, twitching and holding their head.

"Oh my God! What kinda senpai attacks their poor, defenseless kouhai?!"

"Oh, it's you, Iroha."

"Don't lie! You *knew* it was me!"

"No I didn't! I was only 95% percent sure."

"Next time round it up to 100%, dumbass!" Iroha snapped far too loudly for this time of night, still claspng at her head with tears in her eyes. "And even if it wasn't me, you still shouldn't go round hittin' people!"

"It's way past midnight! It was either gonna be you or a burglar, and both of those deserve to be hit."

"I call domestic violence!"

"It's not domestic when you're outside and you don't even live here. Anyway, why're you comin' in through the balcony? You know I have a front door, right?"

"This is the only way to get in without my parents finding out!"

"Yeah, but if the apartment manager finds out, you'll be in even more trouble." I sighed.

Between each balcony in this building, there was a partition which was breakable in case of emergencies. Iroha had broken a hole in the partition between our balconies so that she could come by whenever she wanted. The hole was in the bottom and she usually hid

it behind a large pile of cardboard boxes, but if anybody ever found out, she was done for. Her excuse was that her room was by the window closest to my place, so why shouldn't she come over whenever she wanted?

"So whaddya want?" I asked.

"I just wanted to talk to you."

"You coulda just stayed behind after the party."

"Then you woulda roped me into helpin' you clean up though, right? No thanks! I'm only here 'cause I thought you'd probably be done right about now."

I don't think I've ever met somebody as unashamedly ill-mannered as her in my entire life. I couldn't get mad though, since I was used to it by now.

"You wanted to talk about something serious, huh?"

"Kinda, yeah."

"I'll hear you out, then."

"Thanks." Iroha grinned and twirled around before leaning forward on the balcony railing.



I kicked my sandals on before joining her. It was early summer, and so the wind was still slightly chilly at this time of night. I glanced at Iroha, who was wearing a jacket over her pajamas. She was rubbing her arms, as though a little cold. She must've had a good reason for leaving the warmth of her comfy bed to come talk to me.

Iroha leaned her chin on her folded arms atop the railings and looked at me sideways.

"Nice job getting Mashiro-senpai to come to the party. You went through a lot for that, right?"

"I guess."

"You can touch my boobs if you want. That'll help re-energize you, right?"

"I'm not falling for that one again."

"Okay, so maybe I'm not gonna let you touch my boobs, but I do wanna help in some way."

"Yeah, still not buyin' it."

"Hmph. Whatever, then." Iroha prodded at the back of my hand on the railing in a huff. "It's been a while since I've seen you put your mind to somethin' like that, y'know."

"Yeah. I guess it was kinda bad of me to stick my nose in Mashiro's business."

"I wasn't sayin' it was bad, dummy." Iroha stuck her tongue out at me before turning her gaze to the balcony opposite her family's place. "You said Mashiro-senpai was your cousin, right?"

"Yeah, and her dad's a real big shot."

"So the reason you're being nice to her is so you can get into his company?"

"That's right. It's all about..."

"...Efficiency."

I was being serious. Everything I did to give Mashiro a warm welcome to the fifth floor was for my own sake. I wasn't out to "save" her or anything heroic like that. Operation PT was entirely for the benefit of me and my team. If Iroha was here to call me "cruel" or "heartless," I could well understand that.

"You really are kind, Senpai."

Iroha's soft spoken words were the last thing I expected from anyone with any common sense.

"I must be, or you'd already be dead. I'd have thrown you in the woods somewhere to be eaten by wolves."

"Hey, I'm tryin' to be serious here! Can't you try and meet me halfway?"

"Sorry."

It was hard to keep up with sometimes. That Iroha was scolding

me for not being serious was weird enough in itself.

“You *are* kind, Senpai. I mean...” Iroha glanced around as if to make sure nobody else was listening and lowered her voice before continuing. “You haven’t even told anyone that I’m the voice actor for *Koyagi*, but you still let me hang out with everyone.”

Our indie game had over one million downloads. The impressive story, the charming character designs, and the finely tuned game mechanics were all highly praised, but there was one more thing that impressed the players.

The voice acting. The praise was universal: All the character voices were expressive and enchanting, but it was strange that none of the twenty actors involved were credited. Social media was swimming with rumors. They used famous actors who simply didn’t want to be credited. The project had taken on voice actors who were unknown, but had a good future ahead of them. The voice actors were gathered from people they scouted on the streets, but just so happened to be super talented. Seriously, there was no end to these stupid rumors. They’d never get it right, anyway.

Who would ever believe that all of the voices, both male and female, were done by just one high-school girl?!

Though I guess she wouldn’t be the only voice actor out there with an incredible range.

I thought back to when we were in the tiny recording studio together. It was just me, Iroha, and Otoi-san, the sound engineer who signed a strict NDA. I remember being blown away by Iroha’s astounding and diverse performance. She almost had me believing in the existence of these characters.

“You really are talented, y’know.”

Iroha giggled bashfully.

“The problem is your ego is too easily inflated.”

“Aww, c’mon! I need praise to grow!”

“No you don’t. You grow enough just livin’ off tomato juice.”

Honestly, Iroha didn’t need me at all. Hers was the kind of talent where she woke up one day, and suddenly realized she was actually really good at voice acting. I was just the leech who was there to profit off it.

“C’mon. I wouldn’t be here without you, Senpai.”

“I dunno about that. I think you have a lot to thank that cheerful personality of yours for, to be honest.”

“Open your eyes, Senpai. I only act that way with you and the rest of the Alliance.”

“Right. Around other people, you pretend to be normal.”

“Around my family, too.”

“I guess you really haven’t changed.”

“If I had, maybe I wouldn’t mind being credited as the voice actress.” She winked at me, but there wasn’t much feeling behind it. “Our parents would never let me do that kinda work for real. They won’t even let us have a TV, so the only anime I get to watch is the stuff that’s streamed online.”

“Did you ever find out why they’re so against that kinda thing?”

“No clue. It’s probably got somethin’ to do with my mom’s old job, but she never lets us ask about her past at all. I keep waitin’ for a chance, but sometimes I think it’ll never come, y’know?”

“Right...”

I knew there was some kind of complicated reason behind her parents’ mentality. A few years ago, Ozu even stopped coming to school for a while and now, Iroha was barred from making her own choices in life.

I knew she had talent. I wanted her to be able to spread those beautiful wings of hers and fly out from her cage, into the sky where she belonged.

It was because of her parents that she was keeping her voice roles a secret. She wasn’t in the Alliance’s LIME group for the very same reason. Even Ozu thought the only reason I hung out with her was because she was his sister. It was a little tough to get her into our regular parties without anyone getting suspicious, though.

“Me, my brother, Sumire-chan-sensei... You’re working so hard to try and set all of us free from our families and our chains...”

“By flaunting my connections in your faces, yeah.”

“Welp, that’s just how the world works when capitalism gets involved!”

She had a point.

All the members of the Alliance had talent, but that talent was restricted in some way by their families or circumstances, leading them to give up on what they really wanted. I was the one pulling them out of that pit and letting them shine. I wasn’t going to let them give up on their dreams. There was nothing less efficient, or more harmful to society than ripping someone away from a profession that actually suited them.

Every one of my fellow members had a particular talent that I could only dream of, and yet they were on the cusp of throwing it all away. But I was there to pick them up, using those talents for my own success. What were they thinking? Keeping their super programming, writing, drawing, and voice acting skills to themselves was just plain selfish.

Those were the feelings which led me to forming the 05th Floor Alliance. I knew now just how cringey and selfish *I* was being back then, and it wasn’t something I liked to think too hard about. That

was why I tried to stop anybody talking about the past if I could help it. I was powerless when it came to the pain in the ass that was Kohinata Iroha, though.

"I'm never gonna stop talkin' about the past, 'cause that's how grateful I am. I don't wanna forget."

"I know, but—"

"Yeah, yeah. You were just lookin' out for your own future, right?"

"Yup. So you really don't have any reason to be thanking me."

"Your reasons don't matter, though. You helped me learn what it was I really wanted. I don't care how icky you feel about it; lemme thank you!"

"So you snuck out in the middle of the night just to say 'thank you' for the millionth time?"

"You got it!" She grinned at me.

"You really shouldn't have," I said. And I meant it.

"There you go again. The whole thing about getting Mashiro-senpai to come to the party for your own sake is just an excuse too, right? Y'know, just in case anybody dares think you might be a nice person or somethin'."

"It's like you read my mind. But yeah. I don't want the credit."

She could believe that if it made her feel better. It made me feel gross to think I'd done something purely out of the kindness of my own heart. I hated it when people praised me for my selflessness, because it just wasn't who I was. Iroha knew this full well, and yet she was still smiling as she lifted herself up from the handrail.

"Look, you can paint yourself as some undeserving chump all you want, but I'm still allowed to be grateful to you, okay?"

I didn't reply.

"I know the truth, even if you don't wanna admit it yourself. You *are* a good person." Iroha wrapped her arms around me from behind and squeezed me tight. It felt the exact same as the time she "forgot" to wear her bra. I guess she wasn't wearing one under her pajamas. Not that it mattered right now. I could feel myself relaxing under the warmth of her body, only now realizing just how tense I had been.

I'd been through a lot recently. There was my reunion with Mashiro and putting up with her constant "hatred" of me while being her fake boyfriend, and then there was the whole matter of getting her to open up after years of shutting herself off from the world. I guess anybody'd be exhausted after all of that.

"This does actually make me feel better."

"Haha! That's what they all say on TV when the girl hugs 'em!"

I could feel Iroha's laughter warming my back. Or maybe I was just imagining it.

Neither of us spoke, as neither of us were sure what to do with the strange feeling in the air. I wasn't even really conscious of the soft sensation of her chest anymore. Instead, I focused on the gentle rhythm of her heartbeat, as my own started to settle into the same comfortable pattern.

Just then, Iroha mumbled something. "I just want you to be a bit more honest with yourself, and everyone else. It's kinda sad seeing you lock all these feelings up inside you."

"What do you mean?"

"I know that I'm just your best friend's sister, and that kinda sets me apart from your other friends but... I think I wouldn't mind it if you *did* call me a friend. Then we could just be nice to each other without any sort of weird background ideas of 'efficiency' or whatever. We could just be... equal, I guess."

"You're not happy with how things are now? You mean you wanna be closer?"

"Well... Yeah. I mean, we're not even in the same grade, and..." She quickly cut herself off. "Wait, who cares why?! I'm just sayin', quit bein' so hard on yourself! I want you to do something about that, okay? 'Cause it's super annoying!"

So we were back to the insults, huh?

I did get what she was saying, though. Up until now, I purposely kept my distance from all the other Alliance members apart from Ozu. I was worried that if we ended up getting too chummy and comfortable, I would stop being able to lead them as effectively. That was how little confidence I had in my own skills.

I only became friends with Ozu because it was necessary. It was the easiest way to remove the obstacles that held him back, and help him find his true calling. Otherwise, I would've kept him at arm's length just like I did the others.

But ever since Mashiro showed up, my relationships with everyone else had changed. I'd never had anyone I let in close enough to become my girlfriend, but I had no choice with her, even if it was a fake relationship. At the same time, it seemed to weaken the relationships I had with Iroha, Sumire, and the other members.

I had to stop us from drifting apart, and what Iroha said to me tonight proved it.

"Iroha?"

"What?" came the reply from behind me.

I wasn't planning to start harping on about how much nicer I was gonna be from now on. But at the very least, I wouldn't mind acting more like a friend going forward. Luckily, tomorrow was Saturday.

"Wanna go shopping tomorrow?"

"Huh?! You mean like a date?! An incel like you asking me on a

date?!”

“Y’know I’m close enough to smack you, right?” Despite my threat of violence, I was secretly relieved that she was back to her normal self. “I wanna invite everyone. You can join as my friend, instead of just my friend’s sister.”

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: What do you think about AKI’s invitation?

OZ: I’ll pass.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: lol, me too

OZ: I’d just ruin the whole thing if I went, y’know?

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: ikr! He’s gonna be stuck with his friend’s little sister and his fake girlfriend all alone! Getting his male friend involved would just make things less awkward! I can’t wait!

OZ: Looks like you know a lot about harem anime too, huh?

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: I know bits and pieces. Anyway, while they’re out on the most awkward date ever, I’m gonna be reading through these shota manga I got piled up! This kinda stuff is getting more mainstream and it’s the best thing ever!

OZ: Haha, nice. I’ll probably just stick on some YTube or something. I just hope they have fun out there.

Interlude: Iroha's Feelings

I hate it when things are too quiet. I hate it even more when it's deathly still.

I love the sound of shower water as it pours down my head. It's super comforting, like water streaming off a raincoat.

My nude body was reflected in the mirror. It was almost perfectly symmetrical. I was blessed with a natural beauty, my features just pronounced enough to catch the eyes of all the boys. This was all objectively speaking, of course.

I liked the way my face looked, too. My eyes were a nice shape, my nose was straight, and my lips were plump. If someone said I looked like a handcrafted doll, well, you wouldn't hear this girl protesting! And it was all without make-up. I wouldn't be surprised if I was in the top ten most beautiful girls in all Japan.

Imagine if I actually thought that way, hah!

At the very least, I was cute, and my brother handsome. My parents had to be special to give birth to such a good-looking pair of children, but they tried to keep us away from anything to do with television or stardom. Made me think they must have stepped into those worlds in the past and had a bad time of it.

Don't laugh, but I'm actually quite perceptive and good at picking up on stuff like that! That's why I'm so good at playing the teacher's pet at school and in front of my parents. I soon learned that I could only be my true self around Senpai. I didn't need to bother reading the air. I could just pick on him all I wanted.

I started to take advantage of that comfort, and I feel really bad about it.

It was his fault, though.

Since the early days of elementary school, I used to watch anime in secret on my phone. Because I wasn't allowed to watch TV, I'd always make stuff up and act it out myself, trying out all sorts of different voices. I remember the warm rush I felt when I realized I was getting better and better at those voices.

I wanted to become a professional voice actress, but I held myself back, knowing my mom would be against it. But then, *he* held out his hand to me.

"Don't worry about what everyone else thinks. It's stupid to throw away the one dream in your short life for the sake of others."

He showed me that the world was full of possibility.

I've liked him ever since then.

He was the first person I didn't need to be careful around. If he found me annoying, then that was his punishment for not realizing how much I liked him. That was the pathetic excuse I told myself, anyway.

That reminds me. This time, *he* was being annoying.

He asked me to go shopping with him. I was so sure it was a date! But then he came out and said he wanted to invite the others!

I probably shouldn't have expected any better from him. I hated how stupidly excited his invitation made me, too. I was even showering this morning, when usually I left it till the evening!

I knew I had to be careful, just in case. I knew that Ozuma and Sumire-chan-sensei would both refuse Senpai's invitation. Ozuma, because he thought he was being clever, and Sumire-chan-sensei because she already had to look after her students during the week, and didn't want to put up with them on the weekend, too. They would refuse, but *she* wouldn't.

My strongest rival. The one who was in a fake relationship with Senpai. She was older than me. She was in his class. She wasn't *just* his friend's sister. She was closer to him than that.

She was in a far better position than me from the get-go! Call it women's intuition, but I *knew* she'd accept the invitation. I knew Mashiro-senpai liked Senpai, too.

Worse, she was super cute! I could shower for hours, spend ages working on my hair, and even put on the most expensive perfume in the world, and I still might not stand a chance against her.

I needed to be careful today.

As a new neighbor on our floor, I welcomed her. But things were different when it came to Senpai. Senpai was no longer gonna be the focus of my annoying nature. Today, I was saving it all for Mashiro-senpai.

"I'm not gonna let you steal him from me!"

Chapter 9: My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for My Friend's Enemies

“Only three of us, huh? Guess I’m more hated than I thought.” I looked at the two girls who had shown up and sighed.

We were supposed to meet at the entrance to the shopping mall, in front of the Vengeful Owl statue. The time was 1 p.m. on Saturday, and the mall was crawling with shoppers. I had no idea there even were that many people in this town. Two girls stood out to me beyond the hustle and bustle. These girls didn’t know the meaning of the word “efficiency.” I told them we could just come here together, seeing as we lived in the same building, but they had both refused.

Kohinata Iroha had her headphones slung around her golden hair. Her large eyes and casually exposed skin gave her a lively and cheerful appearance.

Next to her stood Tsukinomori Mashiro, a shy looking girl, whose shoulders were hunched against the crowds. Her silver-blue hair shone with an almost metallic gleam, and her skin was so pale it was like she’d never seen sunlight. Despite the early summer heat, she was wearing knee socks and long sleeves, as though trying to protect herself from the outside world.

Ozu and Sumire didn’t show up, the bastards. Ozu was apparently watching a presentation on foreign technology that he couldn’t tear his eyes away from. Sumire said she was preparing for the next doujinshi convention and she needed to “study” by watching a lot of shota anime.

I couldn’t win. Not against the combined forces of technology presentations and little boys. I guess they really weren’t my friends after all. I suspected that Ozu thought he was being delicate by refusing, but that just wasn’t the case. He probably wanted me and Iroha to spend some alone time together. But why? We weren’t even dating. He was totally barking up the wrong tree, and even if he wasn’t, it was a nonsense plan to begin with.

Because Mashiro was here, too.

The girls were standing next to each other stiffly, neither of them talking to one another. It looked awkward as hell. I had been texting Ozu right up till the last minute, trying to get him to come after all, but my tardiness allowed this to happen. I stuck a smile on my face, hoping beyond hope that my presence would help smooth things over.

“Sup.”

“What the hell, Senpai?! You took ages! Don’tcha know it’s rude to keep a lady waiting?”

“Go die in a fire,” Mashiro added.

“How come you guys are only in sync when it comes to abusing me?”

You wouldn’t have thought they’d been practically ignoring each other until I showed up. At least this time, Mashiro sounded slightly less aggressive when she told me to go die in a fire... I think.

“I told you guys I was gonna be late, didn’t I?”

Last night at the party, I finally got Mashiro’s LIME ID. When I glanced over at her screen and noticed I was her first friend, my heart ached for her. She probably only made the account in a hurry when I asked her for it.

Anyway, the point was that I warned them I was going to be late, because I was busy trying to convince Ozu to drop his stupid presentation.

“I don’t care. I hate being kept waiting,” Mashiro said, glaring at me.

There was that word again. “Hate.” Maybe, just maybe, “being friends with these two” and “having any semblance of self-esteem” were mutually exclusive. I wasn’t about to give up yet, though.

“The movie theater’s on the next floor up, right?”

I was pretty confident in the plan for today. First, we’d watch a movie at the mall’s theater, “TOKO Cinema.” Then we’d discuss the movie and eat junk food in the second floor’s food court. After that, we’d go round the shops and look for clothes or accessories, or we’d head to the arcade.

By the time we’d be done, we were sure to be the best of friends! At least I hoped so, but I still had no idea how I was gonna get any closer to these two in particular. Maybe it’d be enough to just get Iroha to see we were closer than she thought.

“Since everyone who’s gonna show up is already here—Ow! What are you doing?!”

“Duh! I’m linkin’ arms with you, just like regular ol’ pals!” Iroha grinned.

“Maybe regular ol’ girl pals! This is just weird for opposite-sex friends!”

“How would I know? I’ve only ever had girl friends! I dunno how much skinship is okay when it comes to *boy* friends!”

“G-Gimme a break!”

Iroha was grinning at me with all the cheek of a Cheshire cat. That she was wearing a bra this time wasn’t saying much when I could still feel the soft curve of her breast against my arm!

It was not fair for her to pull a dirty trick like this! Sure, I could tell my male instincts to pipe down, and that this was neither the time nor place to get worked up, but I didn't know how long I could keep it up for... and that scared me.

All I could do was glare at the mischievous gremlin trying to manipulate my chaste sensitivities, but I needed something more to pull me away from the tempting magnetism of her boobs.

Unexpectedly, it seemed someone heeded my mental call.

"H-Hey."

Mashiro grabbed onto my other arm, her face screwed up in embarrassment. Sorry to say, there was no softness at all coming from her "chest." All I felt was the delicate fabric of her clothing.

The soft feeling of her skin against me calmed my libido, and the sweet, milky scent coming off her was overwhelmingly soothing, like I was being rocked to sleep in a comfy cloud by a gentle breeze.

What were these two up to?!

I could feel the people around us staring at the guy with a beautiful girl on each arm. I tried to shake Mashiro off, embarrassment clawing at my stomach.

"C-C'mon, guys..."

"This is what... 'pals' do, isn't it?" Mashiro asked.

"It's really not!"

"B-But Iroha-chan is doing it. So I have to as well."

What was I supposed to say to that?

It wouldn't be fair for me to refuse Mashiro while allowing Iroha to keep clinging to me (which I wasn't doing by choice, mind you). Mashiro's face was beet red, and Iroha was clinging to my arm like she was competing in the National Championship of Arm-Clinging. I wanted to tell Mashiro she could let go if it was too embarrassing, but that probably wasn't the issue here. All I could do was give up and let her hold on to me, too, all while the other side was bouncing up against me.

"Haha! Look at you, Senpai! You got yourself a harem! When does your anime start airing, huh?!"

She wouldn't stop laughing, clutching at her stomach with her free hand.

"Y-You bitch!"

"Qu-Quit it! My stomach's killing me!" Iroha howled.

"It's not even that funny! You *know* this looks weird, right? So let go! Don't tell me you're perfectly fine with people staring at you?"

"My own embarrassment is a small price to pay to get you makin' that grumpy face of yours!"

Ugh! What if someone from school saw us? Or worse, what if we ran into Tsukinomori-san? I tried to shake them off as soon as those

possibilities popped into my head, but both of them were stuck to me like glue. The most I could do was squirm helplessly. Iroha grinned, before pointing a finger in the air.

“All righty then! Let’s get goin’!”

“Dammit. It’s been ages since I’ve lost...”

I stood in front of the ticket machine at the cinema, hanging my head. Luckily, both my arms were free now. Jealous and suspicious stares had followed us all the way to the theater, where Iroha decided to cut me a deal. If I footed the bill for the tickets, popcorn, and juice, she’d let me go.

I bit right away. If I hadn’t, I would’ve snapped. In the first place, since I was hanging out with a pair of girls, I was expecting to pay for something at least. I just wish it hadn’t come as a result of Iroha’s scheme.

“What movie d’you guys wanna see?”

Iroha and Mashiro were looking up at the electronic screen showing the movies on offer. The two of them thought for a while before...

“His Name!”

“Classical Jaws: The Shark Who Dances Gracefully to His Own Tune!”

“You guys have completely different tastes, huh?”

“Mine’s about a girl and a guy on different sides of a war who swap bodies! They gotta try and bring peace to their countries, and then they fall in love at the end! It made more than 20 billion yen at the box office and was a huge hit! Every couple needs to see it!”

“Funny, I don’t see any couples here.”

“Even better if you go as just friends! You can look around and be like: ‘Hey, I’m the only dude here who’s not in a relationship!’ Forever Alone Brigade represent!”

“You really don’t think much of me, huh?”

Mashiro stepped forward. “Mainstream cinema is boring. Right now is shark season!”

“If your movie’s so good, how come it’s not as popular as mine? I bet it’s trash!”

“You don’t get it, Iroha-chan. Think of the poor directors who pour their hearts and souls into those B-movies, which underperform just because of the low budget.”

“It’s not like anyone forced them to make those movies!”

Personally, I didn’t care what we saw, but the girls kept arguing.

“What, so you’d rather watch something where they could spend as much as they wanted, without even putting any thought into it?”

That stuff's overproduced, not to mention robotic!"

"C'mon Mashiro-senpai, quit tryin' to force your hipster views on the rest of us!"

"Okay, then. Tell me what's so good about 'His Name'? You only think it's good because that's what everyone else says!"

"What, now you wanna make somethin' of it? Let's go, then! Just don't come cryin' to me when you lose! I've seen movies for days, y'know!"

"Yup," I confirmed. "She sneaks into my place and uses my subscription account."

"What's his is mine! That's why!" Iroha explained.

Mashiro twitched. "You watch movies at... Aki's place? All... All the time?"

"Yeah! Like, every single day!"

"Quit it, Iroha."

Mashiro had been a shut-in until recently, and she was probably pretty sensitive about it. Being reminded that other people were out having fun while she couldn't bear to leave the house must have hurt. I was right, too: She was staring at the floor, her face pale. I couldn't let Iroha continue to harass her like this.

"You guys don't have to fight. There's a simple way to settle this."

"Really?" Iroha asked.

"Uh-huh." I cleared my throat. "We can all go see the movie we want, and meet up here after. Genius, right?"

It was normal for everyone to have differing tastes, and there was no reason for anyone to compromise this way. My plan was a perfect solution to the inefficiency of having everyone dragged to one person's preferred choice.

Neither Mashiro nor Iroha said anything in response to my marvelous suggestion.

"No objections, I see. Okay, now let's—"

"Hold it!"

"Yeah, wait up!"

"What's wrong?"

"Are you kiddin'?! Who the hell takes their friends to the movie theater and then decides it's a good idea to split up?! A dumbass, that's who!"

"Go die in a fire, but study up on how to be a gentleman first."

Iroha's crude ear-splitting remarks and Mashiro's thorny jibes combined were enough to shatter me into pieces. I wish they'd give me some sort of constructive criticism, instead of just hurling insults...

In the end, we took it to a vote, and ended up going to see "His Name." The movie had it all: guns, emotion, explosions, romance, horrified screaming. It was a jam-packed two-and-a-bit hours, and by

the time it was over, even Mashiro looked like she was having fun. Iroha looked awfully smug when she saw this, but I was enjoying things too much for it to bother me.

The three of us headed down to the food court to grab some lunch and discuss the movie. We decided to start by finding somewhere to sit. It was super crowded, but we eventually managed to squeeze through and find ourselves a four-person table by the window.

“Mind if I come back in a bit? I drank way too much cola!” Iroha announced.

“You need to take a whiz?”

“That’s it, you’re officially the worst!”

“Seriously? Everyone has to pee sometime. Girls are way too sensitive about that kinda thing.”

“Uh, actually, you’re being way too casual about it! Wanna come with me, Mashiro-senpai?”

“I-I’m okay, thanks.”

“Guess you’ve got a bigger bladder than me. Okie-dokie, then, see you in a sec!” Iroha raced away.

So it was fine to talk about Mashiro’s urinary habits, but hers were untouchable?

The moment Iroha was gone, Mashiro let out something that sounded like a sigh of relief.

“She make you nervous?”

“Yeah. I still need to get used to her.”

“Same. She’s a special kinda annoying.” I smiled wryly.

“That’s not it. I know she’s not trying to be mean or anything. I’m just not used to dealing with people in general.”

Mashiro and I had been getting along much better since her welcome party. She didn’t mind me speaking to her anymore, and actually treated me like a human being now, even if she did still throw her defenses up when I went too far. I guess a lot of it came down to the fact that we were cousins, and so it didn’t take much for us to pick up where we left off. It would take a little more time until she was comfortable with the other members of the Alliance. Especially Iroha: personality-wise, she and Mashiro were polar opposites.

“To be honest, I think most people have a tough time with Iroha,” I said.

“No, that’s not what I meant.” Mashiro stared down at her lap, and when she spoke again, her voice was strained. “She reminds me of... some of the girls from my old school.”

I could see the sadness in her face as those painful memories came flooding back. Those girls were the reason she shut herself away.

“I’m not gonna ask you about your past. But if you wanna talk

about it, I'll listen." I leaned forward expectantly.

No matter how heavy-hitting those events were, I was prepared to listen. I saw it as one of my duties as her fake boyfriend.

Mashiro stayed silent. Her lips were pressed tightly together, and she looked like she was on the brink of tears. To me, it looked like she was trying to search for the right words, but it was taking a long time.

"Huh?! Tsukinomori-san, is that you?"

The silence was forcefully broken. Mashiro trembled, and the blood drained from her face as her expression stiffened. I'd never seen her like this before, not even when I walked in on her in the bathroom.

She didn't look angry or annoyed... in fact, she looked scared.

"Ooh! And you're with a guy!"

"So you can't even go to school, but you can come out on dates like this no problem? Omigod, haha!"

It was a couple of lowbrow teenage girls. One was nothing more than your typical prep, complete with dyed blonde hair. The other had dark hair, and looked like a respectable girl at first glance, but she wasn't bothering to disguise the scorn on her face.

I knew they were bad news right away. They began to crowd Mashiro.

"U-Um..." Mashiro stuttered.

"Hey, speak up or we can't hear you!"

"Is this guy your boyfriend, huh?" The blonde girl leaned over to study me with no respect for my personal space.

Her fake tan was half hidden under a layer of poorly-blended makeup. I couldn't tell if she was going for a natural look or something glamorous, but either way, it didn't work. A sickly sweet smell (probably perfume) assaulted my nostrils.

"Omigod! He's so perfect for you!" She laughed. "He looks like he spends all his time holed up in his room reading those anime books! I bet he's obsessed with idols, too!"

"They're just as ultra nerdy as each other!"

Was it normal for people to speak so badly about others right in front of their faces? If this was what they were like right now, I shuddered to think what their futures would be like. Some people could survive using only their looks, but these two didn't even have that going for them.

It only took one glance at the way Mashiro was trembling and shrinking back to know that these were the girls who used to bully her.

Why? Could they be jealous of her? It was probably Mashiro's natural beauty that made them see her as an enemy. Wasn't their school meant to be prestigious, though? I didn't realize these sorts of

people attended those kinds of schools in real life. At the very least, I'd never seen them in anime or manga. I guess times were changing. I couldn't help but watch them with pity in my eyes.

"Hey. This guy's startin' to piss me off, lookin' at us like that."

"He's probably just salty that we guessed how pathetic his hobbies are! So what? You think you can win against us with the power of God and anime?!"

"Omigod, shut up! He *does* look like that sort of kid!"

I didn't know about God or anime, but there wasn't anything stopping me from walloping her. And so I did, right in the middle of her laughing face. As if it weren't ugly enough, her makeup-slathered face twisted under my fist and her nose bent to one side. I continued to punch her bleeding face even when she was down on the floor, only stopping to launch myself at her friend who was screaming next to us. I punched and punched them, only stopping when they were no longer able to move.

Isn't the gift of imagination a wonderful thing?

Just seeing the terror in Mashiro's eyes made me want to silence them for real, but unfortunately public morals wouldn't allow it. It didn't count as self-defense if you were defending against words alone.

I didn't want to end up in prison, just because these girls were currently lording it over us. They were the ones who were going to end up in society's trashcan in the future, after all. I decided to be just a little more civilized about the whole thing.

"Hey. Ever heard of a little thing called 'not being a bitch'?"

"Huh? Whaddya talkin' about?"

"Ooh, look, Tsukinomori-san! Must be nice to have a boyfriend to stick up for ya, huh?"

Though the blonde girl was looking uneasy at this point, her friend wasn't slowing down just yet. It would take more than a little glaring to get her to stop. *This one* was a pest. Suddenly, she changed the subject.

"Hey, so does your boyfriend know?"

"Oh, yeah! Did he read your li'l story, huh?"

Mashiro looked up in shock. There was more than just fear in her eyes now.

"D-Don't talk about that now..." she pleaded hoarsely.

"What? Can't hear ya!"

"So he doesn't know, huh? And it's a secret? Whoopsie! Sorry for tellin'!"

The two of them burst into laughter again. I could feel a dark, unpleasant emotion welling up inside me, as though I was the one they were making fun of. If I was feeling this bad, just how much worse must Mashiro have been feeling? To think this was how they

treated her every single day. I suddenly realized that Mashiro wasn't really shy or weak-willed. Even the strongest kid would stop wanting to go to school if they were treated like this.

I didn't know what they meant by her story, but it must have been directly related to her non-attendance. I was curious, of course, but there were more important things to deal with right now.

"Stop it." I glared at them with as much strength and authority as I could muster.

Usually, I made a point to avoid conflict, since it interfered with the efficient way I liked to live my life. This time, I was willing to make an exception.

"C-C'mon, why you gotta be all serious?"

This time, both of them faltered. Even a couple of pigs like them had the instincts to know when they were in danger.

"Your voices, your faces, your personalities... everything about you is pathetic. So get lost. Now."

"Wh-Whadda you know?! You think you're tough shit, nerd?!"

"We got a lotta friends, y'know! Strong guys, way buffer than you!"

"Yeah? Well, so do we. Wanna pit 'em against each other?"

I wasn't lying. Well, maybe I was twisting the truth a little bit. But can you give me something that's scarier than a teacher who spends all her free time drawing young boys and older women together?

"Y-You do, huh?" one of the girls pressed.

"H-Hey, maybe we should quit. What if he's with some really shady types? He looks serious!"

The girls took a step back as the color drained from their faces. I was just glad they were more scared of me than they should've been.

To be honest, I was hoping to provoke them into hitting me, after which I'd have grounds to call the police, but it looked like there was no need.

"E-Ew. I can't believe he's takin' us so seriously!"

"C'mon, let's go. I don't even wanna look at his face anymore."

And leave they did.

"Glad that got rid of them. You okay, Mashiro?" Once I was sure the girls were really gone, I turned my attention to Mashiro sitting next to me.

She didn't reply. Instead, she sat there trembling. She must have been really frightened. Apart from asking her if she was okay, I didn't really know what else I could do in a situation like this. Maybe if I was as smooth as my uncle, I could manage to put a comforting arm around her or something, but I wasn't.

It was just like Iroha was always saying. I didn't have the first clue about girls.

“They were the girls who forced you outta school, right?”

“Yeah...”

“What was that story they were talking about?”

I was still wary of digging up too much of her past, but I felt like the answer to that question would help me to support her somehow.

“I’m sorry.”

The next moment, Mashiro sprang up from her seat and raced away.

“Hey!” I reached out to grab her, but my fingers closed around thin air.

She was moving much faster than she had when I chased her yesterday. Why would she go off on her own if those girls were prowling about? The answer was simple: She’d rather risk running into them again than talking about that “story.”

It was at that moment that Iroha came back.

“What happened, Senpai?”

“Did you see those girls just now?”

“I saw them yeah, but I couldn’t make out what you guys were talking about. They looked kinda dumb, and then when they left, Mashiro raced off—”

“Great. That saves me having to explain.”

To think that this was supposed to be a day of fun and strengthening the bonds between us.

I couldn’t let Mashiro wander off on her own. She was clearly shaken, and I wanted to get to the root of her situation so I could help.

It seemed I wasn’t alone in my feelings.

“Let’s look for her, Senpai!”

“Right. I’ll take this floor, and you go downstairs.”

“Yessir!”

We immediately set to work.

Mashiro was nowhere to be found.

I scoured every corner of every floor, but not once did I catch even a glimpse of her silvery hair. Maybe she darted into the elevator while I was going up the escalator.

Should I turn back in case I missed her?

No, there was no point. Iroha was already searching downstairs. I should leave it to her, and focus on searching the upper levels.

Chasing after Mashiro seemed to be a common trend with me nowadays. Just how many times was Snow White planning to run away from me?

I raced forward, the sweat pouring down my back and the complaints echoing through my head.

But she was still nowhere to be found. I'd searched every single corner of this damn place. Just where could she have gone?

There's no point just searching at random.

That was the conclusion I finally came to. I stopped and began to think carefully.

I was used to chasing after Mashiro by now. Were there any clues in my past experiences that I could use to work out where she'd gone? To escape me the previous day, she ran through some backstreets. Then, she ran up the river bank.

I didn't have enough information to know for sure, but unreliable as it was, it was the best answer I could come up with for now. I had no choice but to go with it. It was still better than searching at random.

Mashiro ran into the alleyways; alleyways were dark. She then went up the river bank, which was slightly elevated.

Where was the highest, darkest place in this mall?

The movie theater.

Had she snuck into one of the screening rooms?

Wait, wasn't there a movie she wanted to see?

I was starting to realize why a movie like that appealed to her so much.

I'm right, aren't I, Mashiro?

She was probably enjoying watching the stupid humans scream for mercy as guts and blood streamed down their faces right about now.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

"Gaaaaaargh!"

"Oh my God!"

"Nooooooooooooooooo!"

As I made my way into the dark room, I could hear the confused, abusive American screams mixed with monstrous roars and a desperate thrashing as they struggled to cling to their lives.

It was a small theater, which could probably fit only a hundred people or so. Even then it was practically deserted, with no sounds of reaction to the horrible onscreen screaming. Once the attack was over, the characters were rewarded with a short break, accompanied by a soundtrack which was far too peaceful, considering what they had just been through. The characters discussed and lamented just how terrifying it was, and how glad they were to still be alive.

Now that things had calmed down a bit, I took the opportunity to stroll through the movie theater and sit down next to the pale-haired girl I had spotted the moment I came in. She was in the back and

highest row. She was sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees, totally engrossed in the shark flick.

“How’s the movie?” I whispered.

“It’s great,” she replied in a low voice, not looking my way.

“You look like you’re enjoying it.”

“The girl who died just now was a cheerleader. She bullied the nerd there.”

“Those types are always the first to die. They deserve it, too.”

“Yeah, they do.” A small smile appeared on Mashiro’s face.

I turned my attention to the screen. There was a blonde girl who I’d wager would get eaten next, a nerdy guy who’d probably survive, a Chinese girl, and an easygoing black man. It was the most standard group of horror movie heroes.

The movie switched to a pointless scene of the group driving around in a car, the music never stopping. Mashiro opened her mouth, as though she knew this car journey served no purpose and was set to go on for at least another five minutes or so. I could see that this wasn’t her first shark-based rodeo.

“Why are you here?”

“To see the movie.”

“You mean to stalk me?” Mashiro paused. “I’m sorry for being mean all the time.”

She scowled as though angry at herself.

“It’s better than keeping it bottled up inside. Whether we like it or not, we’re stuck ‘dating’ anyway, so just take it all out on me if you want.”

“Aki...”

“You wanted to go off at those girls just now, right? Tell ’em to mind their own business and leave you alone. Tell ’em to quit stalking you and if they wanted to hate you, they could keep it to themselves. Right?”

“Yeah.” Mashiro nodded, still clutching her knees. Her shell-shaped earrings shook with the movement. A small, derisive smile formed on her face. “In the past, I was... kind of afraid of people, I guess. I couldn’t stand to look them in the eye, or even talk to them. I never made any friends, and was always alone.”

Mashiro continued, saying that was when the rumors started. Rumors that she thought she was better than everyone else. She only became more and more isolated, and though it was difficult, she continued going to school out of respect for how much her parents were paying for it.

“L-Life was so hard for me then, that I started writing a story to escape. Usually I wrote at home, but sometimes I would write secretly when I was alone in the classroom. Then those girls found me one

time, and started spreading it around.” Mashiro’s voice began to tremble.

That must have been the moment that changed everything. The moment Mashiro’s courage shattered, and she could no longer face going to school when she had fought for so long.

“I didn’t want anyone to find out about my story. Everyone said I was a loner, that I was pathetic... It was horrible. I have my pride, too, you know. I’m not good at anything, especially being happy and stuff, but even then, their words hurt...” Mashiro buried her face into her knees, her shoulders trembling as she started to cry.

I could sympathize. She wanted to protect her pride. That was why she was crying. She was scared of appearing weak.

To Mashiro, everyone around her was strong. In her mind, she was the only weak person in the world. Whether consciously or unconsciously, that was how she viewed things.

“Y’know, I like stories. Especially ones that make you forget the real world.”

“What?”

“There’s someone else I know who started writing to escape reality. He’s a professional now, and I’m a huge fan of his. His name is Makigai Namako-sensei. D’you know him?”

“O-Oh, um... Yeah... I mean...”

“Yeah, he’s a pretty big deal in nerd culture, right? He’s one of UZA Bunko’s best newcomers!”

Plus, for some reason, he decided to join our game-development team.

“I remember in one of the afterwords, he said he wrote to get away from his shitty reality. It really stuck with me. Wanna know why?”

“Wh-Why?”

“Because I could sympathize with the story a hundred percent.”

“Huh?” Mashiro looked at me, puzzled.

“The values represented in the story really resonated with me. The sickening characters who couldn’t be satisfied with just winning; they needed to ruin the lives of the ‘losers’ around them, too... It reminded me a lot of how society is, and how frustrating it can be sometimes.”

“You think so too, Aki?”

“Yeah, and I’m sure a lotta other people do, too. That’s why the book sold so well.”

I read occasionally, but I was pretty careful about *what* I read. I didn’t want to waste my time reading something that wasn’t worth it, after all.

This book was definitely worth it. It resonated with me right to my core, and I found myself relating to the author more than any

other. Finding the right book could sometimes be like finding a needle in a haystack, but even then I hadn't given up on reading altogether. It really spoke volumes about Makigai Namako as an author that he managed to hook me, when I was such a casual reader and mostly considered the time finding something to read wasted. I continued to sing his praises to Mashiro, but she cut me off.

"O-Okay. I get it, so you can stop now." She was bright red for some reason, right up to the tips of her ears.

"Sorry, I guess I kinda got carried away. Y'know something, though? I think the author reminds me of you a little, too. I know he's a guy, so you might think it's different, but he wrote to escape reality, too, and he wrote something that a lot of people related to. I'm just saying that there's nothing embarrassing about you writing stories. This guy's proof of that."

"I don't know... He's using a pen name, right? So he's gotta be embarrassed. That's why he's hiding his true identity."

"Sure, maybe he's shy about it. But that doesn't stop so many people, just like me, appreciating and accepting his work."

"Oh..." Mashiro brought her hand up to touch one of her seashell earrings, her face pinkening a little. Almost immediately, she started to frown. "You're fine, Aki. But Iroha-chan... To me, she's just like them..."

"The girls who were harassing us just now?"

"Yeah. Sorry, I know it's not really fair to say. She just gives off... the same sort of vibes, I guess. I kinda feel like we could never get along..."

I could see that. The way Iroha messed with me was probably similar to how the girls at school messed with Mashiro, especially the way she liked to pick on me with no regard for my feelings. Anybody who saw her doing that would think she was bullying me.

"I start thinking that, if I ever made friends with her, maybe she'll start picking on me like that, too. It makes me freeze up and want to stay away from her."

"You don't gotta worry about that."

"What?"

I placed a hand on Mashiro's head, which was trembling along with her voice.

"Sure, Iroha's annoying, but she's not like those bullies."

"But—"

"I don't think she would, but if she ever says or does something to hurt you, you just gotta let me know. I'll chew her out till she breaks down."

"Aki..."

"So don't worry, okay? She's annoying, but she's not a bad person."

I mean, I put up with her, and I can't stand anything that wastes my time. Even though she's my friend's sister, if she really was that horrible, I'd be avoiding her at all costs."

Don't worry, Mashiro. Just stay with us.

I held my hand out towards her. For a while, Mashiro said nothing, but simply stared at it. Then...

"Okay."

She reached out her trembling hand, and placed it on top of mine.

Mashiro and I left the theater before the movie was finished, and made our way down to the first floor. I sent a message the moment I met up with Mashiro to let Iroha know, but she hadn't seen it yet. She was probably still busy searching. Iroha must have been worried sick. The sooner we could find her and let her know Mashiro was safe, the better.

I cast my gaze this way and that, holding on to Mashiro's hand who was stiff with nerves beside me. The size of this place really wasn't helping us find Iroha. Her golden hair was similar to the shades in vogue with high-schoolers nowadays, and so unlike Mashiro, she was hard to spot in a crowd. Just then, I heard a guffaw that caused me to stand stock still.

There, on a bench under the stairs, sat two high-school girls. In front of them was a third girl with bright hair chatting with them. Those three were the source of the laughter. As you may have guessed, the group consisted of Mashiro's two bullies and Iroha. Pulling Mashiro with me into the shadows, I listened closely to their conversation.

"Hey, are you Tsukinomori-san's friend or something?"

"Friend? No way!" Iroha laughed.

The girl who'd asked grinned. "Yeah, didn't think so! So, she in your class or somethin' at her new school? Izzat why you're looking for that creep?"

"Or... Wait, are you looking for the guy who was with her?"

"Oh, yeah! You know, she was with her boyfriend!"

"Oh? Her boyfriend, huh?" Iroha grinned at the two girls.

"See? They're the same. She's getting really into it, too..." Mashiro whispered from behind me.

"I dunno. Let's keep watching." I nodded to the group of girls as Mashiro blinked at me in confusion.

"Oh, so you two are the piece of shit losers trying to get in their way?" Iroha's grin didn't waver.

"What?" The girls gawked at her.

So did Mashiro. It seemed no one knew what Iroha was playing at except me and her.

"So lemme get this straight. Mashiro-senpai, who's gorgeous by

the way, was out on a date with her awesome boyfriend. Then two ugly bitches show up, and decide to waste their time by bothering a couple leagues above 'em? Did I get that right?

"Well, guess it is kinda unfair. You guys are gonna have nothing in life, while these guys who actually deserve somethin' are gonna go really far, huh?" Iroha spilled out, her shoulders heaving.

The girls scowled at her and jumped up off the bench. "What the hell?! You tryin' to start something?!"

Iroha jabbed her finger into their chests and glared as she brought her face closer to theirs.

"Mouths shut, ears open. Mess with the bull, you get the horns, shitbags." Iroha's tone was dark and threatening, rumbling like a mob boss in a crime movie.

It was a far cry from her usual dumb, sugary-sweet voice. If you blind-folded me, I wouldn't know it was her. I wouldn't be able to see the terrifying glower on her face that sent shivers down my spine, either.

"Wh-What is she doing?" Mashiro asked.

"That's a special trick of hers she keeps up her sleeve. It's just a bluff, but it's super effective."

Iroha was the 05th Floor Alliance's secret weapon: the girl of (probably more than) a million voices. Male, female, and anything in between and outside that, it didn't matter. She voiced every last character in our game, among them a powerful delinquent who conquered a country awash with assassins.

It was a good thing I mentioned to these girls earlier that I had powerful "friends," since it made Iroha's act even more convincing. The girls fell back onto their rears, staring up at Iroha in terror.

"W-Wait... A-Are you one of her boyfriend's friends?"

"I didn't know Tsukinomori-san was involved with such shady types!"

Iroha squatted down in front of them and continued in a threatening tone. "I know what you two did to Mashiro-senpai. Trash like you should be incinerated, not walkin' around and pretending to be human."

"I-I thought you said you weren't her friend!"

"I ain't. Yet. But that don't mean shit," Iroha growled menacingly. I could practically see the gang tattoos on her arms. "You guys've pissed me off. You, and your shitty personalities. Hope that tango foundation on your faces goes well with blood. Better clench your teeth!"



“Eep!”

“W-We’re... We’re sorry! Please... Please don’t...” The girls squeezed their eyes closed in terror as Iroha raised her fists.

“That’s enough.”

I grabbed Iroha’s wrist to stop her. She turned and looked at me in surprise. I stiffened. Even though I knew it was an act, the look in her eyes was horrifying.

“W-We’re sorry!” The girls were still gasping and squeaking in fear.

They collapsed to the floor from relief once they realized I stopped Iroha. I looked down at them. I didn’t need to work to make my gaze scornful; I was sure the contempt I felt for them was clear enough already.

“I told you not to mess with us. Don’t ever show your faces in front of Mashiro again. If you see her in the street, leave her alone. I’m not gonna force you to apologize or turn this into anything, as long as you promise to treat her like a stranger from now on. Okay?” I was sure to make it sound like I was doing them a favor.

Considering how they bullied Mashiro, they deserved a much harsher treatment from me. They were so scared already, though, that it probably wouldn’t make much difference.

The girls nodded desperately, their faces white as sheets.

“Good. That concludes negotiations. Now get lost.”

“Y-Yessssir!”

“We’re sorry!”

They wobbled to their feet and scrambled away on tottering legs. As soon as they were out of sight, the tension in Iroha’s arm drained.

“Nice timing, Senpai. I was kinda worried there for a sec!” Iroha collapsed to the floor, exhausted, all traces of her terrifying persona gone.

“You really shouldn’t do that kinda thing by yourself. If you actually punched them, you’d be finished.”

“Yeah, ’cause I can’t fight for shit! Lucky you showed up before they found out.”

“Ugh. You can’t expect me to come to your rescue every time, y’know.”

Even if Iroha put on a super-convincing voice, she was no stronger than your average feeble high-schooler. If those girls found out, they’d easily beat her with numbers. There was only one reason Iroha was willing to take such a huge risk.

“They really pissed you off, huh?”

“Duh. I mean, they bully someone into hiding themselves away, and then go on living their lives like they haven’t just ruined someone

else's? It's disgusting. I always held back before, 'cause I didn't wanna cause trouble. But then, when I'm with you, I don't have to worry what everyone else thinks, right? And that means I can get away with threatening violence!"

"You only got away with it 'cause I'm here to clean up after you!"

"I thought you said it was okay to leave that kinda thing to you, though?"

"W-Well, maybe I did... Anyway, Mashiro. Whaddya think? This is the real Iroha."

"Huh?" Iroha said as I called over my shoulder into the shadows.

Mashiro tottered out, at which point Iroha grimaced slightly. "Uh oh! You saw all that? S-Sorry for tryin' to be cool and stuff..."

"I'm the one who should be apologizing," Mashiro said.

"You? Why?"

"I thought... I thought you were just like them. But—"

"You thought wrong."

"Yeah."

Iroha's teasing, which Mashiro had been scared of, was harmless. When she was really mad, you knew. She'd throw all her acting ability into turning into the thing you hated or were most scared of and then use that to torment you. That was when you knew she *really* had it in for you.

Her harassment of me on a daily basis was just a fraction of what she was capable of. Having said that, this horrifying side of her wasn't something you needed to worry about too much.

Because Iroha had a good heart.

She wasn't the type to antagonize someone without a very good reason, and I was sure Mashiro understood that too.

Though still a little stiff, her entire face was lit up with a smile. "Would you... be my friend?"

"Hey! I was just about to ask the same thing!" Iroha giggled.

And that was how Mashiro became my friend's sister's friend. It didn't really bode well for my quality of life, though...

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: I wonder how they're doing?

OZ: Worried, are you?

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: They're both cookie-cutter character archetypes. Iroha-chan's the cheerful one, and Mashiro-chan's the gloomy, antisocial one. They're super attractive, but in completely opposite ways. That means they'd probably clash on a lot of things too, right?

OZ: Don't worry. Since they're opposites, it means there's a nice center point between them. Y'know, like the darkness the cheerful one keeps trapped inside her, or the light that the gloomy one is just waiting to

release. That's where they'll be able to relate to each other. That's how Aki managed to get all of us together, like we were orbiting around him. I'm sure he'll pull it off this time, too.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: Still, it means he's got another contender to be his girlfriend...

OZ: Let's just hope that battle's one that's fought with smiles and rainbows instead of them getting pissed at each other. That'd be fun.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: LOL! I was just thinking that.

Epilogue: Meeting with the President

“You’ve gone above and beyond, Akiteru-kun! Especially in such a short space of time!” Tsukinomori Makoto told me after we clinked our glasses together.

Just like before, we were meeting in the Royal Guest family restaurant. I was drinking grape juice, while my uncle had sparkling wine.

“Picking you was a good choice. Now she’ll be having fun with school and friends, and hopefully she’ll forget about her bad experiences from before.”

“I’m happy for her, too.”

“Your little Alliance sure sounds like a nice little bunch.”
Tsukinomori-san winked.

Not at me though, but at the waitress who was constantly glancing in our direction. The moment she realized that he noticed her, her face went bright red and she hid herself away in the back room.

“You’re still going after her?”

“One more visit, and I’ve got her.”

“I don’t think it’ll be a great look for the company if you get arrested...”

He laughed.

I wasn’t joking.

“Don’t worry! I’m a friend to all women!”

“You’re not convincing anyone.”

“By the way, what about that nice young girl from the Alliance who said she’d be Mashiro’s friend? Kohinata Iroha-kun, was it?”

“Oh, Mashiro told you about her? But yeah, that’s her name. She’s not technically in the Alliance, though,” I added quickly.

Tsukinomori-san laughed. “Surely, she’s the girl who did all the voices for *Koyagi*?”

“What makes you say that?”

“My daughter told me about her acting ability. A girl who hangs out with you with a talent for voice acting? It doesn’t take much to figure it out.”

“Well, since the voice acting is all anonymous, it doesn’t just mean that it’s all one person.”

“Come on. I knew from the start there was only one voice actor.”

“What?”

“I know it’s easy to forget, but I worked my way up the career ladder to get where I am today. I have enough experience to know when it’s just the one actor doing several voices, even if they’ve got a huge range. You learn to pick up on it after a while.” He brushed it off as though it wasn’t a big deal.

Though I guess you’d need sharp ears to lead one of the greatest entertainment enterprises in the world. He should probably get his hearing tested, just so that he could end up in the record books.

“Oh, that’s right...”

I thought back to what my uncle said the first time we met here.

“Programmer: OZ. Illustrator: Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. Script: Makigai Namako. Then we have an anonymous voice actress, and producer and director: Aki. Which is you.”

An “anonymous voice actress.” Not “a group of anonymous voice actors.”

He already knew, way back then?

“W-Well, Iroha did do the voices, but—”

“I get it. You want me to keep my mouth shut, right? Don’t worry. I know how to keep things on the down-low. Secrets are great, anyway. They keep people mysterious. Interesting.”

“Thank you.”

“Anyway, about this Kohinata Iroha-kun...” He lowered his voice. “She’s not really your girlfriend, is she?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die, she’s nothing of the sort.”

I couldn’t have put it more plainly. Also, why did he feel the need to lower his voice for a silly question like *that*? He had the ability to switch between mature and immature so quickly it made my head spin.

“Good. Well, I hope you keep on enjoying the little school life you have with Mashiro and your buddies.”

“Of course I will.”

“Oh, and one more thing. Don’t even think about becoming Mashiro’s boyfriend for real, capiche?”

“Don’t worry, that’s not going to happen either.” Even if we were getting along better than before, it was a huge leap from “friend’s sister’s friend” to “lover.” “I’m sure she wouldn’t want that to happen, either. No need to worry.”

Helping himself to another drink from his glass, Tsukinomori-san muttered something under his breath with a wry smile. Just then, the bell at the restaurant door rang out as a new customer entered, meaning I missed what he said.

“...Being dense might be your only flaw.”

Epilogue 2: Mashiro's Determination

It must have been years since I've been able to curl up under my covers with a genuine smile on my face. Just seeing Iroha-chan's account among my LIME friends was making me grin with glee.

I was so glad now that I convinced Dad to let me transfer to Aki's school. At first, I was worried that changing schools wouldn't mean anything, but now those days of anxiety are behind me. Swiping through my smartphone, I opened up a certain app. I then began to talk into my phone, letting out my true feelings.

"Thank you so much, Aki, Ozu, and Murasaki Shikibu-sensei."

These were the three people who kept me going in all the time I was isolated from the world. They were so important to me, even though they only really knew me through a screen. They still treated me as one of them.

I was invited to their parties all the time, but I was always too scared to show my face, worried it would ruin everything. I hid my identity for all this time, and now I'd finally managed to be a part of their group in real life, too.

"Voice changers are really good nowadays, huh?"

When I spoke through my phone, my voice came out like a huskyish man's. I used this app whenever I spoke to them, not even wanting them to know I was a girl. I'd heard that this was the software VTubers used to change their voices too, and that even old men could sound like cute young girls at the press of a button. It worked the other way too, of course.

To be honest, though, I felt really guilty for tricking everyone like this. I still wasn't brave enough to come clean about my true identity.

"Aki doesn't know that I'm Makigai Namako... right?"

When he started praising my work like that, I felt like my face would explode from the embarrassment. Not just embarrassment, but happiness, too. I only wrote that story to run away from my terrifying reality, and only posted it online on a whim. But Aki loved my work from the bottom of his heart and when he spoke about it, I could really feel that.

I'll never forget what happened on that day, either. I glanced at my bedside table, which was where I kept that single postcard, sent to me as fanmail. When I'd seen who it was from all those months ago, I could barely believe it.

“Ooboshi Akiteru... Did Aki figure out I was the author? Is he sending me fanmail as a prank?”

That was the first conclusion I jumped to. Thinking back, that was kind of pathetic. As I soon found out, though, it wasn't a prank at all.

It really *was* fanmail, written unabashedly in harsh, black handwriting. There was barely any white left on the page, as though he wanted to write as much as he could. And there, squeezed in the corner, were his contact details and the URL of the 05th Floor Alliance's home page.

To me, it was like an oasis in the desert. An outstretched hand which would lead me to a way out of my miserable life. For nearly a week I angsted over it, hesitant yet excited to be back in contact with my beloved Aki, until finally making my decision.

Aki had no idea who Makigai Namako really was, and yet his invitation was proof that he hadn't changed in all those years. I realized too that his kindness wasn't exclusive to me, and to be honest, that disappointed me a little. It wasn't enough to squash the joy I felt at being part of his life again, though.

In the end, I couldn't take it, and even ended up changing schools for him. Reuniting with him and spending time with him... after going through all of that, my feelings for him were even stronger than before.

“My feelings for him are real and... and Iroha-chan said they weren't dating either... so it's okay, right?”

Immediately, my heart began thumping. I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. Opening up LIME again, I scrolled down to find Aki's profile. I quickly made this second account when he asked to add me after the party.

I was so used to using LIME under the name “Makigai Namako,” that having one with my real name still felt strange to me. Though there was no denying the huge sparks of joy I felt when he asked for my ID.

How odd then, that I felt so scared now, looking at his LIME account. How would he respond to my message? Acceptance? Or rejection? Anxiety squeezed at the pit of my stomach. It was scary, but this was for the best. It was better than him never realizing how I felt.

I wanted to be closer to him. Special to him. I wasn't okay with just being Makigai Namako to him anymore; otherwise I wouldn't have come after him like this.

I'm gonna do it!

I tapped out my message, pouring every last drop of my emotions into it. And then...

I hit the send button.

Epilogue 3: Setting Sail for Trouble

“Painting the red light district redder, my friend’s sister’s got her foot up our asses!”

When I came home from school and went into my bedroom, the first thing I saw was a pair of thighs.

There was a familiar girl lying stomach-first on my bed, kicking her feet to the beat. She’d helped herself to the new volume of a boys’ manga from my bookshelf, and it looked like she was having a whale of a time reading it.

This girl was Kohinata Iroha. She was a first-year at my high school (I was a second-year).

Her hair was a bright golden color, and the way it fluffed up, as well as the headphones around her neck, made her look like an emperor penguin. Her short-sleeved uniform looked like it was keeping her cool in the humid heat of early summer, along with her short skirt. Without her socks, the line of her long, slender, pale legs was unobstructed from view. She was the epitome of a high-school girl, without the piercings or embellishments that would make her stand out as belonging to a particular subculture.

“Fill your ass to burstin’, then you’re on the floor! But that underwear of yours is to die for!”

She was the kind of girl who only needed to smile at you to make you think she was into you. And that blessed girl who preyed innocently on those tragic boys was now taking over my bed like she owned the place. If she were just sitting there quietly, maybe I wouldn’t mind so much.

“Don’t care if you’re a virgin, just know that this sister—”

Without a word, I pulled her headphones out of the jack on her phone and plugged them into the stereo.

“Aaaargh! Turn that rap music down right now!”

Leaping and flailing like a stranded fish, Iroha flung her headphones across the bed. She continued to whine, wail, and flop around on the bed, clamping her hands over her ears. After all this time (what was it, like a month?) she finally understood how I felt.

“H-How could you, Senpai?! What if my eardrums burst?!”

“I’d marry you to make up for it, of course.”

“Huh?”

“Just kidding. You don’t need to worry about that; that stereo has

a volume limit when you plug headphones in so it doesn't damage your hearing. Those headphones of yours probably won't output more than a certain volume, either."

"Hey, you're right. Actually, my ears feel fine now!"

"Yup. I'd never spend so much money on something without making sure it's good quality, too."

"Y'know, I never thought about how good they were."

"It's easy to take stuff for granted, I guess. Though you can use them however you want, of course."

Turning off the stereo, I picked up the headphones which ended up at the end of the bed, and handed them to Iroha.

It was about a year ago that these were delivered to my place. The feel of the leather and its worn color had changed a lot since then. It was proof that they were much loved.

"At least you haven't been keeping them in a box all this time."

"Course not. I need them to study my passion!"

"Right. If you just wanted to practice acting, all you'd need is yourself. But if you wanna excel, you gotta look to how those more experienced than you perform. Since you weren't ever allowed to watch TV or anything, though—"

"Yup! Listening to all these explicit rap lyrics has really helped boost my acting skills! Thanks so much for getting these for me, Senpai!"

"Joking around like that just makes you sound ungrateful."

"I'm joking around *because* I'm grateful! That's just how girls work!"

"Girls are humans too, right? And when humans are grateful, they just say 'thanks' without all the crap you just added."

"It's kinda hilarious to hear a robot talking about how humans are s'posed to act." Iroha cackled.

Since she was supposed to act like a perfect honor student at school, Iroha kept her headphones at my place. You read that right: *my* place, not hers.

That was fair enough, though. This was the only place she could practice her skills or listen to samples from other voice actors. If her mom ever caught a whiff of anything to do with the world of entertainment, there was no telling how she'd react.

Iroha took the headphones from me before placing them around her neck as usual. Sitting back down on the bed, she began to kick her legs like a kid on a swing.

"Y'know, I really like you. That's why I'm so jealous of Mashiro-senpai."

"Quit trying to mess with me."

"I'm being serious! Y'know when we went to the mall? I was all

hyped up about how I wasn't gonna let her steal you away from me and stuff."

"Uh-huh, so how come you agreed to be her friend at the end? Who ever heard of rivals becoming friends?"

"Well, I went in guns blazing, but then I realized how sweet she was, and how gross those bullies were, and it just made me wanna get back at 'em! Ugh! Those two're such a waste of space!" Iroha's face crumpled into a frown.

Grumpy as her expression was, I could tell that she didn't regret her actions and that she felt no resentment towards Mashiro at all.

This was Kohinata Iroha: The most annoying, kindest girl you could ever hope to meet. That was why I had a hunch that she and Mashiro would end up getting along with each other. Even if they seemed like total opposites at first glance, they had a lot in common under the surface.

"So anyway, I'm gonna stay here for the whole rest of the day, okay? Just to make up for my loss on Saturday."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." I sighed.

I turned my back to her and tossed my school bag to the floor, then sank down into my desk chair. Since Mashiro was tolerating me now, I had no doubt that the rest of our fake relationship should be a cakewalk. Tsukinomori-san would have nothing to worry about.

Just then, my phone buzzed in my pocket. From the vibration pattern, I could tell it was a LIME message. Someone in the Alliance had probably found a meme or something. I pulled out my phone to check.

"Lemme see!"

"Hey! Get off me!"

"I gotta be this close or I can't see! You should get a bigger phone!"

The moment she sensed me getting my phone out, Iroha was clinging to my back like a baby monkey. This was just one of her many annoying behaviors, but not one that bothered me too much. I felt bad that she wasn't in the group chat otherwise. I often let her see our conversation so that she wouldn't feel left out.

"It's probably just Murasaki Shikibu-sensei posting some shota shit, or Makigai Namako-sensei raving about another terrible movie, right? 'Cause Ozuma doesn't really post much. Lemme see." Iroha peered forward, wriggling cheerfully.

With her face right next to mine, the soft feminine scent coming off her was strong. It put me on edge a little. I tried to ignore it as both of us stared at the screen.

There was silence. We both stiffened at the name of the sender and the contents of the message. This had nothing to do with the 05th

Floor Alliance's group chat, and it definitely wasn't a meme.

It was from Tsukinomori Mashiro. Her new account, which I had to fight tooth and nail to get her to share with me. The message at the bottom of the log barely managed to penetrate my skull, it was so unbelievable.

"She... She... What?"

I don't think I'd ever heard Iroha's voice falter like that.

Maybe I should've seen this coming, given the situation. I was completely blind to it all, determined to focus only on the Alliance and enjoying the present so we could all have the future we wanted. I locked myself away within the Alliance, blocking myself off from any interference that could come from without. It was all for the sake of keeping our relationship harmonious, and our creative powers in tip-top shape.

Though I guess history has shown that when countries try and cut themselves off, it never ends well. Eventually, a stronger country will show up with its fleet and force them to open themselves up, exposing them to foreign culture which paves the way for a huge cultural restoration.

I couldn't read the emotion in Iroha's widened eyes as she stared at my phone. I could see that single word reflected in them. A word which changed everything. It was a long time before my brain finally came to grips with its definition. Far too long for a word I was reading in my native language.

One simple word.

“I love you. More than anyone else in the world.”



Afterword

To all of GA Bunko's fans, it's nice to meet you! And if you already know my work through a different publisher, then I'd like to thank you for your ongoing support. I'm the annoying author, mikawaghost, and it's very humbling to be making my GA Bunko debut.

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of "My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me!"

I never know what I'm supposed to write in the afterword. I know there are some people who like to read it first, and others who only read it at the end, so I have to be careful to avoid spoilers. But sometimes that makes me feel like I can't say anything about the book at all! So instead of talking about the plot, I'm going to tell you how "My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me!", or "ImoUza" for short, got published.

It was the summer of 2018 and I was sitting in a trendy, antique-style cafe in Tokyo. The summer was in full swing. Cicadas were crying, crowds were bustling, cars were humming, and commercials on huge screens on the sides of skyscrapers were playing out over the city. I was with my editor from GA Bunko, Nuru-san, and we were having a serious discussion.

"There've been more and more light novels with adult protagonists lately, don't you think?" I asked.

"Yes, I've noticed that, too."

"What about an office romance, then, where both the protagonist and heroine are run-of-the-mill office workers? And maybe she could be on the cover in a suit and tights."

"That sounds good."

"I also feel like there's more demand for realistic, down-to-earth characters in romantic comedies nowadays, instead of ones which are too over-the-top."

"Right."

"So I was thinking of something along these lines: 'My Girlfriend, My Coworker, and My Boss All Work Too Hard!'"

"Sounds interesting. Let me know when you've got something a bit more solid, and we'll go from there."

One week later.

"Hello. I've got my plan with me!"

“Thanks! I’ll take a... look?” Nuru-san opened up the one-kilobyte text file I sent her. “All I can see is a title... ‘My Friend’s Little Sister’? What happened to the office lady?”

“I did a lot of thinking, and I realized that a realistic office setting would just be miserable.”

“Right.”

“It’d be impossible for there to be any ‘sexy accidents,’ because it’d just lead to a sexual harassment complaint. So the main character would just be trying to get with his coworker, while trying to avoid a lawsuit the whole time, which would be really boring. I wanted the heroine to be accessible right from the start.”

“So you went for his friend’s little sister? Not a childhood friend, or his actual little sister?”

“Think about it. Going over to your friend’s house, and then there’s his little sister in the living room, kicking her feet while listening to music and reading manga.”

“Right, I get it.”

“And what if she was really pretty?”

“I see where you’re going with this.”

“Yep.”

“Okay, so I get that much. But what kind of character is she? And what’s the story about?”

“Well...” I laughed. The little sister’s distant relationship to the main character was the only thing I’d come up with so far. “That reminds me, I’ve got this character in one of my other works who ended up being really popular for some reason.”

“Oh?”

“I was trying to write her to be really annoying, but everyone seems to love her for it.”

“Oh, yeah. People have been going crazy over annoying characters lately,” Nuru-san said immediately.

“Really?”

The title popped into my head immediately, and I wrote it down there and then.

“I’ve got it!”

It really came into my head out of nowhere during our very professional discussion.

From the title came the characters, and from the characters came the story. I hope you all enjoyed reading the finished product! I hope you’ll continue supporting Akiteru, Iroha, Mashiro, Ozu, and Sumire as you learn more about their pasts, presents, and futures.

I want to give thanks to the following people. To Tomari-sensei, thank you for bringing the greatest, cutest, and most annoying heroine ever to life! The character designs, the cover, the front matters, and

the illustrations... All of it is just so perfect! I can't wait to continue working with you on the series!

A great big thank you to Nuru-san, all the editing staff at GA Bunko, everyone who supported me from the sales department, the bookstore staff across the country who have sent me their supportive messages, and everyone who helped make this series a reality. I'm more grateful than you could ever imagine.

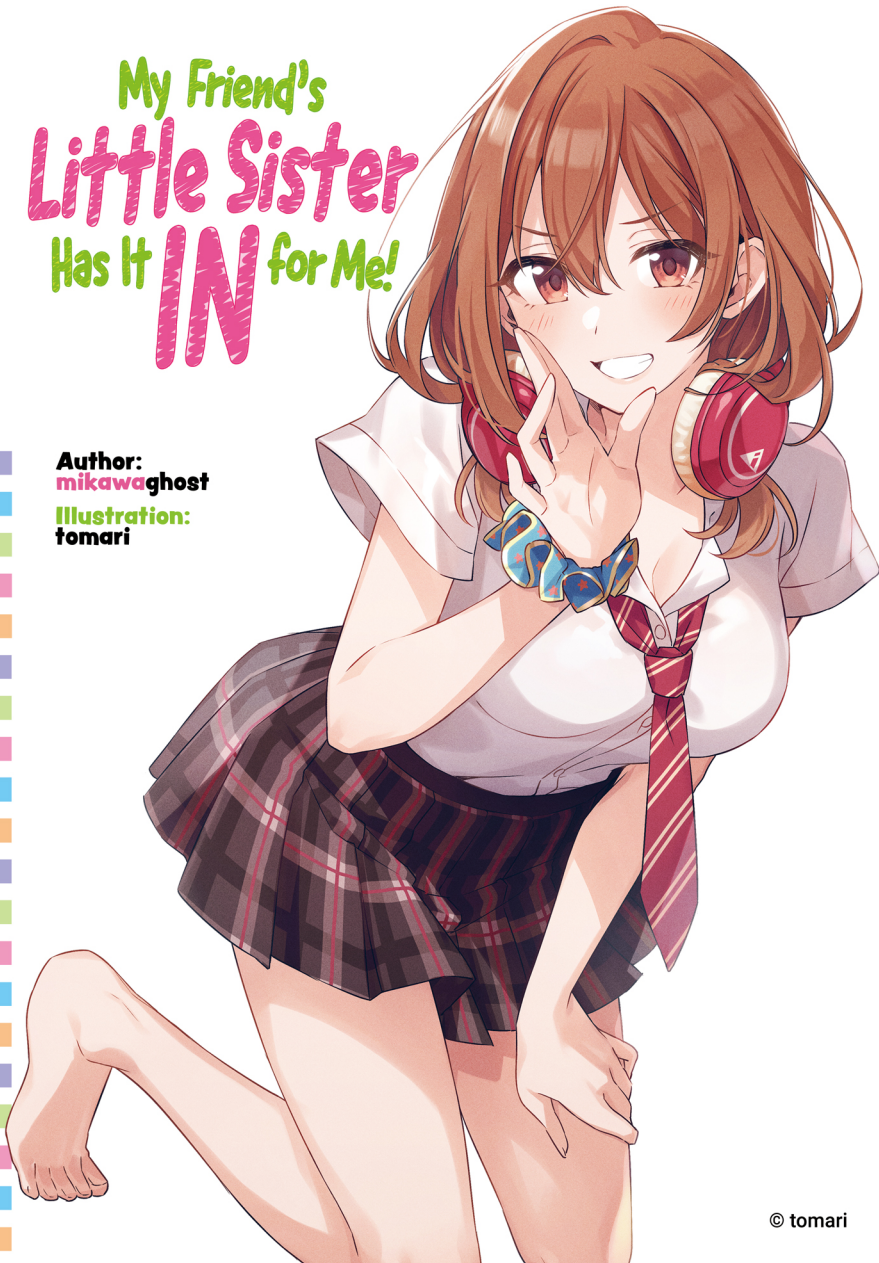
A huge thank you, too, to everyone who picked up and read this book.

—mikawaghost

My Friend's
Little Sister
Has It **IN** for Me!

Author:
mikawaghost

Illustration:
tomari



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OOBOSHI AKITERU

THE PROTAGONIST.
HIS ONLY INTERESTING TRAIT IS
HIS OBSESSION WITH EFFICIENCY.

YES!
SO
SHUT
THE
HELL
UP!

KOHINATA IROHA

AKITERU'S FRIEND'S CRAZY
LITTLE SISTER, WHO STICKS TO HIM
LIKE GLUE.

HEY,
SENPAI.
IF THIS
GUY
FINDS OUT
YOU'RE
WITH A GIRL,
YOU'RE
GONNA
BE IN
TROUBLE,
RIGHT?

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KAGEISHI SUMIRE

A BEAUTIFUL
AND SMART TEACHER...
RIGHT?

KOHINATA OZUMA

AKITERU'S ONLY FRIEND,
AND IROMA'S BROTHER.
A THOUGHTFUL AND ALL-
AROUND DECENT GUY.

WHAT...
WHAT'S
ALL
THIS?

TSUKINOMORI MASHIRO

AKITERU'S COUSIN. SHE ACTS SO
COLDLY TOWARDS HIM, THAT IT'S
KIND OF ANNOYING...

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THIS
IS WHAT...
'PALS' DO,
ISN'T IT?
SO I
HAVE TO
AS WELL.

IT'S NOT
EVEN THAT
FUNNY! YOU
KNOW THIS
LOOKS WEIRD,
RIGHT? SO
LET GO!

HA
HA
HA
HA
HA
HA
HA!

LOOK AT
YOU, SENPAI!!
YOU GOT
YOURSELF
A HAREM!

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NIDAKE UZAI Vol. 1

by mikawaghost

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